

Itachi, Is That A Baby?

By: SpoonandJohn

Petunia performs a bit of accidental magic. It says something about her parenting that Uchiha Itachi is considered a better prospect for raising a child. Young Hari is raised by one of the most infamous nukenin of all time and a cadre of "Uncles" whose cumulative effect is very... prominent. And someone had the bright idea to bring him back to England. Merlin help them all.

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A Familicide Is A Better Parent

Chapter 1: A Familicide is a Better Parent...

Petunia Dursley looked down at the basket on her front step. There was a baby in it. She looked around-was someone in her wonderfully normal neighborhood playing some sort of prank? No, no one was watching her. She would have known; as an expert peeper herself, she knew how to spot someone spying. So maybe someone thought that her normal house was in fact some sort of church? She knew it happened all the time with churches, but her house looked about as far from a church as it was possible for a good Anglican home to be.

Well then. She knelt and opened the letter in the basket. After a few minutes, she glared at the baby sleeping contentedly. "Fuck Wizards." She didn't swear, but this was a special occasion. She put the letter in the basket and stared at it some more. "You know," she said to the sleeping child. "I can't raise you. I *hate* Wizards. They took my sister and then they killed her. I'd be a terrible person to raise a Wizard. And Vernon... he really hates anything not normal. I just wish there was some safe place for you to go-" The basket was gone from her step.

She blinked at the open space for a few moments. Then she picked up the milk and went inside, resolved to mention this to all of no one. Ever.

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X

Kisame yawned. It was too godsdamn early in the morning to have to be awake, but the life of the nukenin was filled with unexpected hardships. You think that once you quit your village, you're free to do as you like and then you discover that you need to pay the bills and so you have to take jobs you don't want anyway. Next thing you

know, you're waking up just as early as before, only now you don't have a warm bed to sleep in first. Still, people got much less bent out of shape when he killed civilians, so it was better.

Madara had given him an interesting partner, too. It was a real trip for him. His partner was thirteen. Seriously. What the hell? And to top it off, the kid was ex-ANBU and had murdered his whole family in one night before escaping his village with no one the wiser. Even that freak Momochi hadn't been that messed up. Kisame was confident in his power, but he wasn't afraid to admit that Itachi scared the shit out of him sometimes.

There was a rustle in the bushes. That would be his partner coming back from a morning ablutions. Kisame looked up. Then he blinked a few times, just to check his eyes were working. He tried pinching himself. As a last resort, he dumped a tenth of his chakra into a dispelling. At last, he decided to admit that this seemed to be real. "Itachi," he said to the stoic youth. "Is that a baby?"

Itachi looked down at the bundle in his arms and then up at Kisame. "Yes."

X

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The three of them entered the main tower in Ame. There was the usual silence from Itachi, but Kisame was not engaging in banter of any sort. They rode the lift up to the central chamber and stepped inside to face the man who called himself Pein.

"Leader-sama," said Kisame. He paused. How the hell did he put this to the man pretending to lead a terrorist organization? Then he decided to just get this over with. "Itachi brought a baby back with us."

The orange haired man with piercings adorning his face blinked. Eyes filled with rings looked around as though searching for the

prank. "What?"

"Yeah. That was pretty much my reaction, too." Kisame admitted.

"I'm going to raise him," interjected Itachi. "Nostalgia." When he received blank stares, he went on, "my little brother would be about this age now."

"And?" prompted Pein when no further statement seemed to be forthcoming.

"And?" replied Itachi.

Pein threw his hands up in the air. "Just don't let it interfere with your work." He turned to look at a blue haired woman beside him. "Why do I feel like my life has just become more complicated?"

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Hidan stormed into the room and proceeded to, in a friendly way, attempt to disembowel Itachi. The fourteen-year-old dodged without looking up from his book. After two more swings, he noticed that someone was attacking him and looked up.

"Yes?"

"Your brat..." Hidan pointed at his head. A dirty nappy was dangling off of it, covering the side of his face. "He hit me in the head with this."

Itachi looked at Hidan neutrally.

"Alright, so I was saying to him that I was waiting for him to get old enough to be scared and then I'd sacrifice him, but still."

Stare.

"And then his stupid cloth comes flying off his ass and smacks me in the face."

Stare.

Hidan growled. "That's the whole story."

"You're saying," Itachi asked slowly, "that he managed to somehow just move his napkin from his body to your face?"

"It flew off him, yes."

"Flew? Not like he tossed it?"

"No."

"So why do you think it was him?"

"There wasn't any other fucker in the room, was there? It had to be that little shit-maker."

"I see. Just for your own safety, a question: did you hurt Hari?"

"Fuck no. I know what'd happen if I did that. You don't care if I take a few swings at you, but if I cough at the little bastard, you'd cut my dick off and shove it somewhere. I figured a few threats were okay though, y'know?"

"I see." Itachi walked slowly from the room. As he did, his foot accidentally slipped and smashed into Hidan's groin. "Don't threaten my son, Hidan."

X

X

"Leader-sama?"

Pein looked up from his map of the world to see Itachi at the door.
"Yes?"

"Apparently Hari is doing something odd. I don't know how, but he managed to fling his soiled napkin into Hidan's face without removing it. Or something like that. Hidan is indisposed at the moment, so I can't ask further questions."

Kisame, standing beside the map, started to snicker.

"As odd as that is, Itachi," said Pein. "I can't help but wonder: why are you coming to me?"

"I was hoping you'd take a look at him, Leader-sama. To see if there is anything to... see." He finished lamely.

Pein sighed and walked around the map-table. "Alright then. Kisame, do ask Kakuzu to please have a word with Hidan. I would like the two of them in working shape for this afternoon."

The two Doujutsu users left the room together.

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"I'm sorry about this." That was all the Leaf team heard before things went horribly wrong for them. For two of the chūnin, it was the last thing they heard. Their heads became detached from their bodies and rolled on the road.

For Jian, it was merely the last thing he heard before the whole world went dark.

When he opened his eyes, it was to a dark cave and one of the most infamous ninja to ever come from Leaf Village. He whimpered and wet himself. "What do you want?"

"I have a deal to offer you," replied Itachi. "You use your Byakugan to tell me what's wrong with this child, and I'll leave you alone. Or you can be stupidly brave and I torture you to death. Then I go back to Leaf and find your immediate family and torture them too, just to be sure. Your choice." He gave a slight smile which had all the warmth of a shark's (he'd been taking lessons from Kisame).

Itachi had taken the step of kidnapping a Hyūga simply because Leader-sama, with his Rinnegan, had been unable to identify exactly what it was that was wrong with Hari. Sort of. He was able to tell that Hari had a very developed set of chakra coils—far more than an infant should. Itachi smiled at that, his son was going to be a powerhouse someday. That had probably been why something had been flung. Maybe. But Leader-sama had also spotted something in that odd scar on his son's forehead. Leader-sama hadn't been able to explain that and had recommended consulting the Hyūga.

Jian activated his Byakugan and looked at the toddler presented to him. It was about two years old, give or take, though its chakra network was far beyond that and resembled an adult's. Messy black hair and pale skin suggested that this was the son of the infamous ninja, but the boy had bright green eyes and everyone knew that Uchiha only had coal black ones. Except, of course, for the Sharingan.

"Um... if I had to guess—"

"You don't." Itachi smiled without mirth. "Be certain."

"R-r-right." Jian tried to focus. It was difficult. For some reason, he kept seeing his own death. "It looks... that can't be right. It looks as if there's..." he turned his face to Itachi. "I think there's a person in that mark on his forehead. Wait, no." He held up a hand. "Not a person exactly. Maybe a bit of a person? I can see part of an independent chakra-network that's partly grafted into his. So I guess... well, it's the best way to put this... maybe a bit of a soul in there? Or something. It's not something I've seen before or anything."

Itachi stared at Jian until the older male shivered. "Interesting."

"I mean, I'm not sure it's actually a soul. It's definitely part of a chakra network. I can't think of any way for that to happen at all, honestly. So I'm unfortunately having to make some assumptions. I know that grafted limbs just become part of the recipient's network and this is clearly an extra-network thing." Jian focused on the subject and let himself ease his worries as he did.

"A soul..." Itachi looked up at the ceiling. "Very well." He nodded at Jian. "As promised, I shall leave you alone now."

"Thank-" There was a meaty thunk as a kunai slammed into Jian's chest, spearing his heart.

"Your corpse will find itself quite alone in this cave, especially after I collapse the entrance." Itachi patted the man on the head as the man coughed blood and died.

Itachi stared down at the body. Then he blinked. The man's eyes weren't fading. He could *not* be that lucky. But yes, the eyes still gleamed to his sight with the mark of the Hyūga. "Well then," he murmured as he knelt. "waste not, want not." His hands glowed.

X

X

"Itachi," said Kisame as the young man entered their rooms in the Ame tower.

"Yes?"

"Is the kid wearing a blindfold?"

"No."

"It *looks* like a blindfold, Itachi. I mean, his eyes are covered by cloth wrapped around his head and everything."

"It's not a blindfold."

"I'm going to regret this. What is it, then?"

"Bandages."

"Ah." Kisame sighed. "And *why* does your brat have bandages across his eyes?"

"Because he's healing."

"I'm going to need a little more here, Itachi."

"I may have performed some field-surgery."

"Why?"

"I... found a spare set of Byakugan and decided that I shouldn't waste it."

"You 'found' a Byakugan? Two of them?"

"... Yes."

"Did you tell Leader-sama?"

"Yes."

"Alright then." Kisame shrugged. Itachi had always been a freak, but since he adopted the kid, he'd become a little less randomly terrifying and a little more just odd. Unless something threatened Hari, *then* he was scary as fuck.

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"A soul in his head?" Pein sounded skeptical.

"That's what the Hyūga said."

The orange-haired man shrugged. "Okay then." Another orange-haired figure stepped from the shadows. Like Pein's primary body, it had black metal rods shoved through its flesh. It reached out and pressed a finger to the livid scar on Hari's forehead.

"Well, that's odd," the two Pein said.

"What is?"

"I can speak Snake now."

"What?"

"Yeah. I don't get it either. But I just learned Snake. So I'm going to go do something that doesn't involve your son for a while. Maybe the world will go back to making sense."

X

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A five-year-old Hari fell from the rooftop that he and his father were sparring on. Twenty feet later, he hit the ground, feet-first.

"Goddamn, motherfucking piss-cunt son of a syphilitic whore with crabs and the broken-down donkey in the stable out back she uses to pleasure herself between tricks." He began to walk up the wall back to their training circle.

"Okay. Uncle Hidan is no longer allowed to babysit."

"Aww."

X

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Seven-year-old Hari ducked under a spray of black fire from his father's Sharingan. His blank eyes stared straight ahead as he dove to his right, kunai slamming into the rooftop they still used for most of their spars. He drew a handful of tags and activated them, tossing them behind him at his father as he leapt from the roof to the next building. There was just enough time to hear, "what the-" before the explosion destroyed their sparring ring.

A moment later, he spotted his father's chakra following him, more fire racing towards his position. That was to be expected; nothing could hurt his dad. Uncle Pein was going to be angry again, though. He hated it when their spars spread to the rest of the village instead of the forests or grasslands outside it. There was just enough time to avoid the three fireballs that set the roof on fire as he jumped to a third building.

Maybe it was time to try something else? He turned as he jumped and his hands flashed through a series of signs. False Darkness burst from his palms and Itachi had to spin to the side to avoid the bolt of lightning. Hari fired a second one and turned to focus on running while his father got out of the way.

"Uncle Kakuzu hasn't been keeping me apprised, I see," his father's voice said next to his ear. Then things went dark.

X

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Ten-year-old Hari walked beside his father and Uncle Kisame as they returned to Ame. It had been a quiet mission-which meant that none of them had been forced to actually work killing the bandits that attacked. Uncle Kisame had been really nice and let Hari have his share too. While Hari had been with his father on jobs pretty much since he was found, he had begun taking part after he'd nearly hit his father with False Darkness three years ago and had been informed that if he was ready to use A-ranked techniques in spars without feeling tired, he was ready to deal with untrained bandits. He'd

improved from there. This time, there had been a B-rank ninja that he'd gotten to fight on his own.

The three of them entered Pein's chamber. The man glanced up from his maps. "I assume everything went well, yes?" He didn't wait for a response. "Good. Itachi, Kisame, I need a word with you."

Hari nodded and stepped out of the room.

"So, things are slowly beginning to come to a head," began Pein. "I understand that Leaf's Power of Human Sacrifice is the last to enter play, but will be doing so within the year if things go well. Sasori's agents tell me that there might be some trouble with that. We may have to take steps to ensure that—"

"DAAAAAAD!"

Itachi looked up. He was about to leave the room when Hari came running in through the window and along the ceiling. The boy dropped, sticking the landing automatically and held out an envelope.

Itachi took it. "To Harry (Hari) Potter, Akatsuki bedchambers, god's Tower, Rain."

Pein coughed. "What?"

Kisame looked over Itachi's shoulder. "Is that parchment? Who uses parchment? I mean, aside from serious seal-masters."

Itachi faced Pein. "Shall I open it?"

"NO!" Pein shouted. "You three take it outside Rain and use clones to check it."

"Understood, Leader-sama," Itachi turned to his partner and son. A clone formed next to him and grabbed the letter. "Let's go."

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The three landed in a clearing in Grass. Kisame created a pair of water clones, Hari added a pair of shadow clones. They sat down. Itachi meditated, Kisame petted Samehada, Hari pretended to meditate and instead just wondered why someone had sent him a letter.

After forty seconds, the three of them jumped as they heard a cry of, "What the flying fuck?" in Itachi's voice.

"Dad," said Hari, "you're not allowed to hang out with Uncle Hidan anymore. Ow!" He clutched his forehead where his father had poked him while Kisame clutched his stomach, laughing.

They went over to where the clones had gathered. Itachi took the opened letter from his double and began to read. "What the flying fuck?"

Hari jumped to see over his father's shoulder. He didn't need to, but it was a way to amuse himself. "Hogwarts." Jump. "School." Jump. "Of." Jump. "Witchcraft?" Jump. "And." Jump. "Wizardry? Wait, what?"

Kisame leaned over. "Yeah, that's what it says."

"What?"

"You're sounding like a broken record, kid."

Itachi sighed. "It appears genuine. For a given value of genuine." He looked at his son. "Though I have no idea who sent it, so I can't ask them questions."

"You mean like if they're serious or just fucking with us like some teenage girl being toyed with by an old man with money and experience who's just using her for her body and plans to discard her like used trash when he's done?"

Sigh. "Yes. I'm going to hurt Hidan again."

Further discussion was cut off as there was a burst of flame beside Hari. The bird that appeared got off half a squawk before False Darkness, a Great Fireball, and Samehada turned it into a mangled bunch of feathers. Which then caught on fire and burned to ash.

"I'll bite," said Hari. "What was that?"

"No idea," muttered Kisame. "But it... is that pile of ash moving?" He poked the pile with the tip of Samehada and revealed a small chick with the red-gold plumage of the bird they had just killed.

"It appears that it didn't die." Itachi leaned down and poked the thing with a finger. "By all indications, this is a chick of the same species that we just turned to ash. Odd." The bird burst into flames and disappeared.

The three looked at each other. "So, we have your son being invited to some school that teaches..." Kisame snickered. "Magic. And a bird that appears in a cloud of fire instead of smoke and doesn't die when we kill the hell out of it. Somehow, this feels about normal for us."

"Unfortunately."

"So..." said Hari. "What do we tell Uncle Pein?"

"..." Itachi frowned. "I have no idea."

There was another burst of fire. This time, all three just watched as the bird appeared, flapping its wings in a desperate attempt to hold itself aloft while carrying a letter bigger than itself. Itachi formed a clone which took the letter from the bird. It immediately dropped to the ground, panting.

Kisame watched as his teammate read the letter after his clone checked it. At the same time, Hari was using a technique Kisame

and Kakuzu had taught the boy to create some water for the bird to drink. It was impressive progress, just a year ago, the kid would have turned the bird into a pile of bloody meat with that move. His adoptive nephew (the kid had ended up growing on him) had so much power in his coils that it was always amazing that he was able to develop such control. Kisame was actually a bit jealous.

"Hn." Kisame looked at his partner. That was unusual: Itachi rarely devolved into the famed Uchiha communication form. It was one of his best traits. "It appears that we will be having visitors soon who will be able to answer questions."

"Yeah?"

"So it seems."

The bird vanished and returned in two more explosions of fire. This time, there were two people with it. One of them had a comically long beard and a strange smile. "Hello, my name is Albus Dumbledore."

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Three weeks later, Hari was back to his usual routine while waiting for the school year to start. It had been an interesting meeting. The middle-age lady (just out of cougar-years, according to Hidan) had stared at Kisame, first in horror and then in a sort of predatory fascination that had seriously disturbed the giant nukerin. The man who introduced himself as Dumbledore had explained that they wanted Hari to attend the school his parents (Hari had been quick to interject that these were merely the sperm and egg donors, to Dumbledore's quiet dismay) had attended and that in doing so, he would be able to learn how to wield magic. His father had been unusually quick to agree, but perhaps he wanted to see what his son would learn. His father had said it was something about spending time with people his own age or something like that, but Hari had taken it in stride; his father was a busy S-rank ninja and eventually

would not be able to take care of him all the time, so learning extra skills could be useful.

He jumped straight into a double backflip, avoiding Air Pressure and Intelligent Hard Work (Uncle Kakuzu seriously needed someone to help him make up better names for his attacks) that turned the training field into a little pocket of hell. Hari began something he'd been practicing for more than a year. His hands blurred into signs, each working on a separate technique. He spat a Water Trumpet at his uncle and tossed in False Darkness before landing and running for cover, using his Byakugan to keep an eye on the man while he conjured a Water Dragon and Earth Dragon to leap out at his uncle.

Moments later, he was forced to avoid False Darkness coming at him as one of Uncle Kakuzu's hearts flanked him. The Water heart was probably out there, too. Joy. Both hands worked on the same technique this time as he gathered chakra and fired off a move he'd created: an invisible dragon made of wind roared as it shot forwards, slamming into the Lightning heart. "Shit. DAAAD!"

Itachi was suddenly next to him. "I just killed a heart. Help!"

"Kakuzu!" Itachi headed straight for the ancient ninja.

"What?"

"I think we can call this spar."

"Why?"

"My son just obliterated your heart."

"He what?"

"Indeed."

"Well shit." Kakuzu recalled his hearts. "Sonofa... Hari!" He glared at the figure in the distance, which was poised to run. "You killed my

Lightning heart. Do you have *any* idea how annoying that is to replace?"

"Uh... heh heh?" Hari grinned sickly.

Kakuzu sighed. "Good work, brat." Then he was suddenly in front of Hari and punched him in the face. "When you wake up... eh. I've got nothing. I've got a heart to replace, see you Itachi." He walked off, muttering curses.

Itachi walked over and poked his son. Apparently he really was knocked out. Oh well. He scooped up his son and carried him back to the tower.

X

X

When Hari woke up, his father was sitting by his bed. "So, I've decided you should go a bit early. It will be good for you to have time to get used to the place you'll be spending time. Besides, it will give Kakuzu enough time to cool off.

"They left us a thing they called a 'portkey' they said would take you there. You can handle yourself. Think of this as a vacation. Try not to attract too much attention, like I've taught you. In other words, don't be Uncle Hidan. Or Uncle Kisame. Or Uncle Deidara. You know something: just be me or Uncle Sasori. In control, in other words."

(A/N John)

So... as usual, this is a fic that came about because Spoon had some stupid question. In this case, she asked me "who would be the worst Naruto character to raise Harry?" My immediate response of Maito Gai was met with "been done". I still say it would have been hilarious. Anyway, so somehow we settled on Uchiha Itachi. And the effect of being raised by a bunch of

professional killers too disrespectful, disreputable, or just plain insane to work with the official villages of professional killers... well, it made itself felt in ways. Hari mostly has aspects of Kisame (hit it with power), Sasori (pick your targets), Hidan (it's fun to offend), and Tobi (Tobi didn't put glue on your mask, Tobi is a good boy!). And his father's consummate skill.

(A/N John - Some notes)

So, there are a few notes on changes to canon beyond the obvious. The big one is that the massacre happened shortly after the Kyūbi's attack. Hence the comment that Sasuke would be the same age. Actually, that's about the only one that comes to mind.

John Out

Uncle Hidan's Influence at Work

Chapter 2: Uncle Hidan's Influence At Work

A week later, Hari had managed to do his shopping, a good bit of learning, and made a shopping list he intended to fill before going home. The library had been full of fascinating books. He was truly in awe. He also had a trunk filled with random books that had looked interesting.

It had been an... experience, getting his wand. He had been told about wands and, on the advice of the odd smiling man, brought with him some things from his home, just in case they were needed. They had been. The strange man who ran the wand store had been possibly the oddest person he'd ever met, including his uncles. He'd been strangely disappointed when Hari hadn't reacted with a specific wand. In the end, he ended up having to make one for Hari from materials he'd brought. His father hadn't told him where he got them, or what they were, just that they were good choices.

The old man had identified the wood as Konohana-some sort of magical peach tree or something. He'd been revolted by the other component offered and had taken it only when Hari had started getting angry and the store had begun to fill with wind.

Hari wasn't sure why the Wizards made such a big deal out of wands anyway. He'd tried a few spells out of the book of spells he'd had to buy for school and they'd worked easily enough. Without the wand. He'd just pointed and focused. People always put so much stock in things like that. He'd been working on getting rid of handsigns for his techniques for the same reason.

And it had been such a trip, seeing all those people out there in the city. He'd seen more people in a day walking around than he had in his whole life, including one stealthy trip into Leaf to look in on his sort-of-brother. This train station was amazing. Only Snow Country

had anything even slightly like this, and it was still in the beginning stages.

Thankfully, someone had included in the letter about school supplies how to get onto the platform. He didn't really enjoy the idea of standing around in the station, surrounded by things he didn't understand. Instead, he was sitting in a compartment on the train, feet up and relaxing comfortably.

X

X

They had been moving (and it was faster than even his dad could run) for twenty minutes at least when someone decided to open the door to his compartment. "They're saying Harry Potter is on this train. Are you him?"

Hari looked up. He'd seen the boy coming, of course, but still. "Aren't you rude? Just barging in. What if I'd been a couple getting in a bit of unsupervised time fucking? Don't you think it'd put the mood off if you came in and stared at her cunt while he's trying to get his rocks off? Anyway, no, I'm not. Though if you want to see that, you could try three doors down the train on the other side. They put up some sort of thing that's keeping out sound, but they're rutting away."

The door slammed. Hari smiled to himself and leaned back, watching the two and noting that Aunt Konan's book collection never mentioned some of the more... gross aspects of the activity. Still, it was interesting, if only because he described it so often using words Uncle Hidan had taught him. He supposed he'd understand the fascination in a few years.

For the next hour, he amused himself by spying on the train, watching to see who was talking to whom and, quite often, reading their lips. Uncle Sasori had taught him that skill as part of the year they spent on intelligence gathering. His taciturn uncle often

complained at how unfair it was that he could use the Byakugan for the task to read the lips of everyone in an area all at once.

Then the door opened again. This time it was the bushy-haired one he'd seen going from door to door, asking about toads. "No," he said before she could open her mouth. "I've seen no toads around here." She gaped at him. "Is there something else you want?" he asked, his eyes still closed.

"Uh. No. Wait, how did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"How did you know what it was I was going to ask?"

He just smiled at her.

"Aren't you going to tell me?"

"Nope."

"Are you a first year?"

"No. I'm a seventh year. I have a glandular problem thanks to my parents' families both practicing incest for generations. Thank you for commenting on it though, bitch. Thanks for reminding me."

"I am so sorry!" She backed out of the room and closed the door.

"Why did dad want me not to hang out with Uncle Hidan? This is a blast."

X

X

The rest of the train ride was mostly quiet. Some redhead twins had come in and, from his spying, he'd known they were planning on pranking him. So he'd swapped their prank into their pockets and

listened to them scream outside the door as whatever it was they'd planned happened to them. Otherwise, it was peaceful for him. He got to watch three more couples engage in sex, one of them homosexual. There were also four fights, two couples breaking up, six blackmail plots in the works, and more gossip about who had the biggest tits/most dreamy eyes than he had ever wanted to know about.

When the train stopped, he got up and walked outside. He figured someone would get the luggage to the castle or not; either way, anything important was stored in the tattoos on his forearms his father had gotten him when he completed his first mission.

Some freak bigger than Uncle Kisame was calling for first years in a strange accent. He shrugged and walked that way. The man looked like someone built way over scale whose brain hadn't been included in the upgrade. He could see it was normal sized, possibly a bit on the small side. Oh well, Uncle Zetsu's white half was like that and was still really nice when it wasn't hungry.

He didn't bother getting into a boat and just trotted along beside them on the surface of the lake. Uncle Kisame had explained that boats were for civilians. Uncle Hidan had further explained that this meant "pussy bitches". Since Hari wasn't a civilian, that meant he didn't use boats except for water that would be stupid to try and cross. Like Snow country. Even Uncle Kisame would use a boat there to avoid becoming a sharkcicle.

Hari had to admit that the castle did look pretty impressive, but considering he'd seen Uncle Pein cut loose... well, he didn't think Uncle Pein was actually a god, but he could understand why people made the mistake. Compared to that, it was just a big pile of rock.

On the wharf, he stood there, waiting with the rest when the woman who had creeped out Uncle Kisame brought them inside. While they were waiting, he ducked out of the way of a jabbing finger.

"You!" The one with the bushy hair was vibrating with indignation.
"You said you were a seventh year!"

"Yes. And I also told you I had a glandular problem. I lied. It got you to go away, didn't it?"

"Why did you lie?"

"Because I wanted you to fuck off. I still do." Hari turned to face her, his eyes hidden behind the curtain of black hair he allowed to grow out. "So please be quiet."

The girl instead went on a tirade that only ceased when ghosts came through the wall. Hari wasn't surprised by them, since he'd seen them coming, but had been surprised that they were actually ghosts and could bypass walls. That wasn't normal. He *had* to know how they did it.

Before she could begin again, the woman came back and ushered them into the large room with all the students. It was interesting to see how the chatter changed on school grounds. They spoke more about gossip and less about plots. Certainly, the two who had been central in the plotting of several of those escapades were instead discussing the stars for a class later in the year.

Hari watched as a hat was placed on a stool. Apparently this was some sort of sacred ritual used to determine the fates of children throughout life. He was fairly certain that this was one of the stupider ways it could be done. Wait, was it singing? That was really odd. And one of the adults had a foreign chakra network on the back of his head. How strange. Hari was pretty sure he remembered his father saying he'd had something similar on his forehead. Perhaps it was a common condition? He'd ask the medic.

The Sorting (and it had a capital letter to it) continued peacefully until, "Potter, Harry." The uptick in mutters was more interesting since he could read them. Three tables mostly were curious and one table mostly wished he would die right there.

"Potter, Harry!" The woman stormed over. "That's you."

"Hm? Oh! Right. You people are weird. I was expecting to hear my real name first, since you guys were doing everything out of order."

"What?"

"Well, you people are disrespectful and use given names first and treat family names as something separate, so I thought you were going by that and so was expecting that you'd skipped me."

"What? You know something? No. Just go put the hat on." The woman's voice grew clipped.

"Fine, fine." Hari trotted over and dropped the hat on his head. It didn't even settle before screaming "SLYTHERIN!"

The room went silent. Into it came, "Damn it!" The words echoed through the hall. Hari plucked the hat from his head and dropped it on the stool as he rose. "I guess it was to be expected." He shrugged and trotted over to the table of silver and green.

The whispers started up about the time he got to the table and found that there were suddenly no seats. So he slipped his hands between two students and moved them apart to take a place on the bench.

"We don't want you here, Potter," hissed one of the boys he'd moved aside. In the background, the Sorting had started up again, with the stern lady's voice shaking a bit.

"Why ever not?" Hari looked at the larger boy. He was easily half again Hari's height and weight and was glowering down at the trim figure with long, black hair.

"Are you stupid?" snapped another as someone was sorted into Hufflepuff.

"No," Hari smiled over at the dark-haired boy who'd spoken.
"Perhaps you could explain?"

"You killed the Dark Lord."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to be more specific," replied Hari mildly. "I know my tally isn't up to my father's, or even my uncles', but I *have* killed quite a few people. Which one did you have in mind?"

"The Dark Lord," growled the first one to speak. "The greatest wizard of all time."

"No, I don't remember him."

"You were an infant at the time, of course you don't remember it!" That was from Malfoy, Draco. Hari remembered him as the idiot who'd asked if he had seen Harry Potter.

"I killed someone when I was an infant?"

"You were one," spat Malfoy.

"My dad is going to be so jealous. I've gotta tell Uncle Hidan!" For some reason, the rest of the students at the table stared at him oddly. "My father's a legend and he didn't kill anyone until he was six!" And this explanation didn't seem to be clearing things up. On the upside, people decided to be quiet for a bit.

The odd old man, Dumbledore, Hari recalled, stood up. He was rather pale and stumbled over his words for a moment as he looked at Hari. "So, I have a good number of announcements to make, but we're all hungry, so it can wait until after we've eaten. Nitwit, Blunder, Oddity, Freak. Thank you." He waved his hand and food began to appear in the middle of the tables.

Hari glared at it. "What is this stuff?"

Several of his erstwhile housemates looked at him. "Food?"

"This isn't food. This is what happens if you let an instant ramen cook loose on the world. Is there anything vaguely resembling nutrition in any of this?" He picked up a fork (a device he'd only

come into contact with in the past week) and prodded what appeared to be a giant lump of meat that had been drenched in its own fat. He'd been living in London for the past week and had found that the joys of a migrant community meant that he'd had access to at least some real food.

He sat back and watched as those around him began to eat with what could only be described as "gusto". Uncle Hidan ate that way. So did Uncle Kakuzu sometimes. Uncle Zetsu as well, but his father had explained that Uncle Zetsu was a special case. Instead, Hari occupied himself with reading the lips of those around him.

It was quite disturbing to discover that approximately all of the conversation in the whole hall involved him and his sorting. For some reason, people felt that this might be a bad sign because it involved the house that had been declared "dark". Hari wasn't clear on this, but Slytherin seemed to be evil because some bad person had come out of it. Or something. No one was willing to say the name of whomever it was, so he was just guessing. He was wishing he'd read more recent history texts instead of just the history of the school and his textbooks.

The greasy bat-person up at the teachers' table made for interesting reading. There were some words that his father had said he should never use being tossed around under the man's breath. Hari wasn't clear on why the man hated him since it looked like it was about his father, and he was fairly certain his dad had never been here before, so how could it be related?

The one who made Uncle Kisame nervous was arguing with he-of-the-white-beard about whether the hat could have made a mistake. Hari was unhappy to admit that it hadn't. As much as it did not qualify as cunning to end up in the house known entirely for cunning, it made a certain amount of sense that the sorting wouldn't take that into account. It was probably sensible to stick the cunning, ambitious people (read: cutthroat sons of bitches) into one house to cut down on the bloodshed by keeping it in one place.

The rest of the conversations up there followed more along those lines. The one thing that everyone in the whole room agreed on, Hari mused, was that he should have ended up in the house of the stupid. Oh he knew from reading the history book about the school that it was called the house of the brave, but it was pretty clearly full of stupid people. Uncle Hidan would love it, though-but it probably didn't count if the person were immortal.

It was pretty boring. Except for those twins with the red hair. Those two made for interesting amusement throughout the meal. Hari didn't understand half of what they were saying, but he was able to gather they planned to prank him. That would make things interesting, at least. He would hate to get out of practice without Uncle Sasori occasionally trying to assassinate him without warning or trapping his bed. Still, he might have to curtail their activities eventually. It would depend how dull things were.

Suddenly the "food" (he was resolved to have strong words with someone over that) vanished and white-beard got up. "Now that we are fed and watered," he studiously ignored Hari's not-so-quiet snort. "I have those announcements. Firstly, Mr. Filch would like me to alert the new students that there is a full list of forbidden objects posted on his door and that, thanks to Missers Weasley, it has been expanded yet again.

"To be specific, the entire catalogue of Zonko's joke shop is now officially on the list, as are any of the products from the company that makes that rather terrific bubble gum that lets you hover for several... well, anyway, the list is not negotiable, I'm talking to you, Fred and George Weasley.

"In addition to the forbidden objects, the Forbidden Forest is, shockingly enough, forbidden. This, too, is not a negotiable point. Any student stupid enough to go into the Forest will not be punished, we simply won't go look for you. Considering the nature of the dwellers in the Forest, I will remind the students that they should avoid it unless they are facing their Potions final.

"Quidditch practices will be posted by your heads of house in the common rooms in two-week's time. At that point, they will no doubt begin tryouts for open positions. I remind you, and I'm speaking to Mister Malfoy here, that first years are, without exception, not allowed their own broomsticks. Those who bring them will find that they are confiscated and used to update the school's shoddy stock.

"I have one further announcement to make. This year, the rooms on the east side of the third floor are *forbidden* to anyone who does not wish to die a truly remarkable death. I realize that in a school of young people, some of you are certain to go exploring because of this warning, but by giving it, I am now covered as far as the board of directors is concerned. I reiterate that the rooms on the east side of the third floor are forbidden and that any student who dies as a result of ignoring this warning will be buried in the usual mass grave in back of the castle reserved for those who have thankfully removed themselves from our society before their idiocy can do too much damage. Thank you. Now, time for bed. Sleep well." Dumbledore bowed and turned, walking out the staff entrance to the hall.

Hari nodded to himself. That sounded remarkably like the sort of warnings Uncle Kisame and Uncle Kakuzu gave. And Uncle Sasori about his workshop. Of course, Hari didn't heed the warnings, but it meant he was cautious when he snuck in. On the upside, he knew what he was going to do tonight.

He rose when his housemates got up. It was a silent cavalcade that made its way through a maze of corridors down into the dungeons. Hari wondered how anyone without the Byakugan was supposed to navigate this place. As it was, he'd spotted two staircases that had moved and a door that had stopped being a door as they passed it. This was going to be fun.

A girl wearing a shiny badge on her chest muttered something to the wall and it swung aside to reveal a room filled with chairs, couches, desks, and a fireplace. "This is the common room," she said. "The password is 'Darkness'. Don't tell anyone the password. It changes weekly. Now fuck off to sleep."

Hari poked his head up the stairs on the right (the one labeled "boys") and found that each boy got his own room. He made a note of which one was his and then turned and left the common room. He'd figured that he was supposed to be in bed about now, which was just as well, since it meant no one would be looking for him. Still, best to be safe.

It took him several tries to work out what these people considered to be the third floor. He passed several students who moved with the deliberation of a patrol. But for some reason, they never looked up. It was something to consider.

Apparently the "third floor" was actually the floor half-way up from the third floor above the main entrance. It was an endless source of frustration to ninja; no two groups ever counted floors the same way and so instructions on where to find a target could result in some very interesting incidents. There was one country where they counted starting from the basement levels and Uncle Kakuzu said that the problem had been that someone had built another subbasement and the mission-notes hadn't included that. It was why Uncle Kakuzu was still forbidden in Rabbit-foot Country. They took a dim view of blowing up the infant princess.

The third floor wasn't what Hari had expected. For one thing, while there were four doors on the east side of it, three of them were currently just door-shaped parts of the wall. He could see marks on them that he guessed meant that they *could* be doors, but at the moment, they were not. And inside the last door... Uncle Pein?

Well, alright, it wasn't Uncle Pein, but there was a giant dog with three heads. That was sufficiently similar. He was going to have to write Uncle Pein to find out if someone had stolen one of his pets. He walked down the wall and opened the door. That wasn't one of Uncle Pein's. None of them barked at him. He'd take another look later; right now, he was going back to his new room to sleep.

(A/N John - Some notes)

Some of you (and I hope this is everyone) have noticed a certain cavalier attitude in Dumbledore. This is partly the result of the somewhat crack-ish nature of the story and partly a decision I came to as I was writing Dumbledore's intro-speech. I decided Dumbledore is just seeing how far he can go around the bend before someone calls him out. So far, he's disappointed in them.

Ferreting Out His Place

Chapter 3: Ferreting Out His Place

Hari woke to the sound of someone approaching his door. Then it opened and someone was doing something to his bed. Without more experience with magic, he would only be guessing what it was, but it probably wasn't someone wishing him well. People rarely did that without warning to a sleeping person.

He dropped down once the door was closed. To be fair to the person trying to harm him, it wasn't as though he slept in his bed. Not for years. Specifically, not since his father had him start staying on the ceiling in his sleep as a form of chakra control.

Hari made note of the boy's chakra signature. He would be having "words" with that one. That's what his father always called it when he threw Uncle Hidan off of the tower. It took him a moment to decide that it was still the middle of the night. That meant he had time; good.

He padded from his room and along the ceiling to the room of the boy who had decided to make his life interesting. It was probably wrong to deal with someone who was so obviously a civilian like this, but the rules said that any civilian stupid enough to attack a shinobi might as well be removed before spawning could happen.

It was the work of a moment to open the door and slip inside. He considered a lethal response, but decided that it might be a little extreme for a first offense. Instead, his fingers glowed blue and he swiped them along the idiot's legs, shredding the muscle. A finger slammed into the throat stopped any annoying screams before they could wake people.

Hari slipped from the room, the darkness covering his identity. He returned to his quarters to lie up on the ceiling and catch a few more hours' sleep.

X

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The morning was annoying for Hari. All he wanted was to go find the kitchens and have some words with whomever it was down there that sent up the stuff that they laughably called food. Instead, he had to spend several minutes dodging Professors Snape and Dumbledore to get out and explore while they did some "investigating" or something about some "attack". And then he couldn't figure out where the kitchens were. The magic of the castle meant that his eyes only sometimes worked properly. It was frustrating to be as blind as normal people.

Thankfully, there was bread on the table. It wasn't his first choice, but it was just wheat and water and so on. It was something. Still, what happened to rice? It was a staple grain, wasn't it? He'd managed to avoid English cooking during his time in London, so this was his first discovery of the unhappy subject. He missed London, with the communities from China and India and their rice.

And that was to say nothing of the filth they drank. Sugary juice wasn't bad, that was a source of energy, but the juice of a *squash*? Really? And their idea of tea was just disgusting. Heavy milk in overbrewed waste.

X

X

"Where were you, Potter?" snapped the greasy one.

Hari looked up. He'd seen the Professor approaching and had chosen to ignore the man in the hopes that he wouldn't want to talk. There was something decidedly unpleasant about his attitude. "Could you be more specific, sir?" he asked. "I have been alive for eleven years and consequently in quite a lot of space."

"This morning, Potter. When the House was being questioned." The greasy one's face was reddening.

"I didn't want to be bothered, so I went looking for the kitchens." Hari replied mildly. "Could you tell me where I can find them, sir? I looked around and I was unable to work it out. I'd like to talk to them about seeing if some proper food can be arranged."

"Detention!" growled Snape. "This must be a record. Even your arrogant father didn't manage it on his first morning!"

"I don't think my father ever served a detention in his life. It's bad form to attend them, sir. It shows lack of skill." Hari cocked his head. "And you are wrong; he was assigned detention his first morning-so was everyone else. Every day, too. 'Good practice avoiding patrols', I think he said."

Snape snarled in inarticulate rage and stormed off, muttering. Hari was amused at some of the inventive phrases. Though he wished the man would stop saying things about his father. He was still sure his father had never even *been* to England and so it was surprising that people managed to hate him here. At least he knew why people were scared of him back home. Here, it was just strange.

X

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"Good morning, students!" Beard-man was decidedly cheerful for early morning. Hari was not a morning person so much as he was a person who liked not being cooked. Since his father's idea of dealing with someone sleeping in was to set the bed on fire, he'd learned to be awake in the mornings.

"Welcome to your first day at Hogwarts. Welcome to the first day of the new school year to our returning students. I'm sure all of you are eager to be going to classes so you can get your homework, so I won't delay too long with announcements." He was apparently

unaware of the general poor response to his statement. "Your head of house will soon come by with schedules. Make sure to be on time to your classes, especially those of you who are first years-first impressions make a huge difference in how your time at Hogwarts will go. Those of you who make a poor showing, for example, will no doubt be hated by your Professors and punished with subtle dislike and a myriad of special ways a teacher can make a student's life an utter misery. I'm looking at Miss Raide over there in Hufflepuff.

"In keeping with Hogwarts tradition, no Prefect or Professor will answer questions regarding locations of various key points of the castle including, but not limited to: classrooms, common rooms, the Great Hall, the entrance hall, Hogsmeade, the Hospital Wing, the owlrey, the kitchens, or the places out of the way of patrols where students can get themselves pregnant. I have so far managed to keep pregnancies to an unheard-of low during my time here and I wish to continue this trend. To that end, I ask that any young witch willing to put out please see the mediwitch about contraceptives. Furthermore, I ask any wizard intending to partake in such activities to please see same about same. The wards are configured to alert nearby patrols to any such actions without protection and I will remind those of you old enough to enjoy it that prefects patrol with cameras so that we can publish pictures of anyone who fails to maintain contraceptive safety.

"On the subject of clubs, we will be preparing a list of them starting next week. Classes start in ten minutes and Professors will be handing out schedules in fifteen. Good morning." He turned and walked out of the room, dressing gown flapping around his knees as he sipped from a cup of tea, a cheerfully bemused expression on his face.

Hari snickered to himself as the first years looked around to find that no one seemed the least bit concerned about these statements. He glanced through the schedules in front of Snape for his, read it and rose. He gave his peers in the house a cheery wave that they returned with glares, silence, rude gestures, and death threats. He

felt like he was back home in god's tower-Uncle Hidan liked to show affection.

X

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Hari was sitting with his feet on a desk when the rest of the first year Slytherins trooped into the Charms classroom.

"How did you get here?" hissed Malfoy.

"I walked," replied Hari. "The human foot is eminently capable of enabling transportation. Didn't you use them?"

"Perhaps," murmured a girl he was pretty sure was named Greenass. "What Malfoy meant was that you didn't wait for the Professor to give us schedules and so you shouldn't have known what class we have or where it is."

"I read my schedule, same as you, though," said Hari. "It said where the classroom is and everything."

"But not with any point of reference," she replied. "And besides, you left before the schedules were handed out."

"So?"

"So you shouldn't have known!"

"But I read it."

She threw her hands up and sat down next to him-all the other seats on the side of the room that seemed to have been taken by Slytherin were occupied. Hufflepuffs began to enter the room.

"For the sake of curiosity," he began.

"Don't talk to me."

"Fine, fine. Just, so I don't get it wrong: what's your name?"

She was silent. He was about to try meditating when she responded, "Daphne Greengrass."

He was glad he'd asked. It might have led to... difficulties as Uncle Kakuzu called it, if he'd gotten her name wrong. Only Uncle Hidan thought that offending women was a good idea-well Uncle Kisame did when he was bored.

The tiny man came into the room, clambered up a stepladder and onto his desk. The man had a good deal of chakra for someone so small. Definitely not a child, despite his size. He climbed a stack of books which finally put him at normal height for a standing adult male and took out a scroll of parchment.

Hari tuned out the man reading names until he heard, "Potter, Harry," thump. His eyes had been watching and so he saw the man read his name and proceed to slip from the book, slam his head into the edge of his desk and pitch forwards onto the flagstone floor.

"Well," said Hari. He stood up and walked over to the collapsed man and poked him with a toe. "It appears class is dismissed. I *do* hope this won't be a trend." He tucked his hands in his pockets and walked out of the room, whistling.

X

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The Slytherins stumbled into the Transfiguration classroom to find Hari was once again sitting at a desk. This time he was leaning back with his feet propped up on the book they'd been assigned to purchase for the class. Also, why was there a cat sitting on the desk at the front of the room?

"Hello again," Hari said politely. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be napping. "What kept you?" The bushy haired girl was

glaring daggers at the ones who were apparently delaying her class. The rest of her housemates seemed much less concerned.

Daphne sat beside Hari. "We had to find our way here. Some people didn't believe the announcement and tried to ask for directions. Instead of saying they didn't know or wouldn't tell us, they sent us to the dungeons."

"Ah. Sounds reasonable." Hari nodded, smiling sagely. "A good test to see if you can understand false information. A little civilian, but probably good for you late bloomers."

"What." Daphne's response didn't have the inflection to it that made a question-it was too flatly confused.

"At least we got here before the teacher," muttered Malfoy. He ignored Hari's snicker.

A red-haired boy covered in grime stumbled into the room and collapsed into a seat. "That bloody Peeves," he grumbled. "Good luck the Professor's lazy."

Hari almost fell out of his seat, clutching his stomach, his snorts muffled. The cat jumped down from the desk, turning into a woman as it did. "I think you will find, Mister Weasley," the woman said in a voice as icily cold as Uncle Pein's could be. "That I am not, in fact, lazy. I would ask if you woke up in time to get to your classes today, but I already know that you missed your first period to stuff your face in the Great Hall. Your mother will, no doubt, have something to say about it in front of everyone come dinner time. She will surely be glad that she is not shouting at her older sons for once, though I suspect they will manage that soon enough."

"You know," said Hari conversationally. "Now I get why Uncle Kisame always looked a little wary near you."

"What?"

"You're a cat-woman. He's a shark. I guess that's why you kept looking at him like he was dinner."

The Professor sniffed haughtily and drew her wand. "I will be teaching the second most dangerous class in the castle. Excepting Potions, where idiocy can not only kill you, but your whole class and endanger the rest of the student body, this is the class in which you risk death most often." Her wand swept down and the desk behind her turned into a rhinoceros and back.

"For the moment, I doubt most of you can be trusted with sticks, let alone the wands you have. Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to take them away from you to prevent the likely set of injuries that we will have by the end of the class. We will, today, not be learning how to turn desks into animals. I am hoping to minimize my first-day casualties by having you turn matchsticks into needles. I expect only two visits to the hospital wing. I will be *most displeased* if you lot manage to get more than that."

Hari watched as she demonstrated how to do the spell with the detached air belonging to someone who had already practiced this a week ago. When she let them try, he still hadn't taken his feet off his desk. On the other hand, there was no matchstick on his desk. There was, however, a shiny, new needle. It had little engravings on it. They read, "Hari did it first." And then, "Bitches." In millimeter high lettering.

"Mister Potter, you will take your feet off of your..." The Professor stared at the needle. "... finished needle? Did you finish?"

"Yes, Professor." He still didn't have his eyes open.

"I see." She placed another matchstick on his desk. "Can you..." before she finished, it had become a silver needle with a gold-plated point and little green scrollwork along the sides. She blinked.
"Alright. What are you doing now?"

"I'm reading my textbook, Professor."

"You have it under your feet, Mister Potter."

"Yes?"

"Do you have eyes on your feet?"

"No, Professor. Besides, the book is closed anyway."

"So how are you reading it?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Detention, Mister Potter."

"I'll bite," Hari's eyes were still closed. "Why?"

"Disrespect, Mister Potter."

"I said 'thank you', Professor. Besides, you can't give me detention tonight. I'm already going to be not attending detention with Professor Snape." He paused. "I suppose I could work you in also, though. I guess it's not much harder to fail to attend two detentions than one."

McGonagall was beginning to twitch. "Fifty points from Slytherin!"

"As you like, Professor."

As the woman walked away, Hari calmly dodged a ball of rolled up parchment. Automatically, he picked up the needle from his desk and flicked it behind him. The scream as it punched into Malfoy's eye surprised him-his Uncles weren't such whiny pussies.

The Professor rushed over to examine the screaming boy. Daphne leaned over. "What the heck, Potter?"

"He flung something on his desk at me, so I did the same to him?" Hari replied.

"But his eye?"

"It's soft."

"Wait, wait. *How* did you do that? Your eyes are closed!"

"And?"

"Gah!" She turned and went back to glaring at her matchstick for all of fifteen seconds. Then her head snapped around. "Wait. How did you finish the transfiguration? You haven't had your wand out."

"Is that necessary?" Hari sounded genuinely perplexed.

"Yes!"

The matchstick on her desk turned into a golden needle and back to matchstick, this time made of hickory. "I think you might be wrong." She began to twitch.

"Mister Potter," came the Professor's voice from behind them.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Mister Malfoy has been sent to the Hospital Wing."

"I'm not sure why you feel you need to tell me, Professor, but okay."

"He claimed it was your fault."

"Odd. What happened to him?"

"He said that-open your eyes when you're talking to me." He did so.
"What the bloody fucking hell?"

"I'm sorry, Professor?"

"Your eyes, boy!"

"What about them?"

"You're blind!"

"I am?" Hari blinked rapidly. "If you say so, Professor. That's a worryingly pale shade you've turned, though. Perhaps you should have a seat?"

McGonagall sputtered for several moments and then stormed off.

"She never did get to figure out what happened with Malfoy," muttered Daphne.

"Didn't she? Huh."

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Hari's classmates tried to follow him when he left for lunch, but since he proceeded to walk along the banister of a staircase and jump to another one a floor below, they lost track of him. They didn't find him during lunch, although Malfoy turned up, ranting about Potter. There was a divide between the majority of the house, who were angry with Potter for one reason or another (losing points, killing the Dark Lord, etc) and those who mostly didn't really care. That was made up mostly of Daphne Greengrass, who was finding that Hari was just too *weird* to be properly angry at.

The next time they saw him was in History of Magic. He was already in the classroom with the Ravenclaws when they got there, but cheerfully waved to them and left when the ghost began to talk without taking roll.

He did turn up at dinner. In front of him (and only him) was a plate of rice with some steamed fish and unsauced vegetables.

"What are you eating, Potter?" sneered Malfoy, his eye covered in a bandage.

"Food?"

Daphne shook her head. She was already beginning to get a feeling for how this was going to go. It was depressing how predictable her house was. At least this time when Malfoy threw a roll at Hari, all that flew back at him was a leg of chicken that... hit his other eye. She sighed.

"Potter!" roared Professor Snape.

"Yes, Professor?"

"I'll see you expelled for two attacks on Mister Malfoy!" The greasy man was bearing down on the table, wand drawn.

"Two attacks, Professor?"

"You threw a needle into his eye earlier today!"

"No I didn't, Professor."

"He said you did!"

"And I say I didn't." Hari looked confused again. "So that means the vote is even and it needs to go to a third party? Perhaps Professor McGonagall can help?"

"You did it!"

"If you say so, Professor. But in that case, I must report that Malfoy attempted to disembowel me six times during the class."

"NO HE DIDN'T!"

"I say he did. That's proof, right?"

"No!"

"Well then, I hardly think that him saying I did something qualifies, does it."

There was silence in the Great Hall as this went on. Dumbledore appeared to be mildly amused. Certainly, his eyes were twinkling away.

"You did and that's final!"

"No, Professor."

Snape was turning a dark purple. "I say you did it!"

"And I say Malfoy just tried to stab me with a broadsword."

"HE DIDN'T! We're all right here, Potter! He didn't do it!"

"So now you want other witnesses?" Hari scratched his cheek. "But I thought all we needed was an absurd accusation? Besides, you said two attacks."

"We all saw you throw a piece of chicken into Mister Malfoy's eye!"

"Wasn't that part of the food fight?"

"What?" Snape's voice was a strangled gasp.

"He threw a roll, so I thought we were having a food fight and I threw something back."

There was a cheer from the Gryffindor table. "Alright!" cheered Gred. "Malfoy's started a food fight!" Suddenly, the air was thick with mashed potatoes banished towards other tables. Tureens of gravy emptied themselves as Lee Jordan helped his friends.

Within seconds, the other tables had responded, half at the twins for the attack and half at Malfoy for starting it. Professor Dumbledore animated a roast chicken, which picked up a knife and saucer and proceeded to defend him, wearing a helmet made of a hollowed out

roll. He then went back to eating as the pseudo-knight warded off flying food with its little china shield.

Snape was almost instantly covered from head to foot in mash and gravy and he was being barraged by animated drumsticks that kept trying to beat out the school song on his head. The four tables were all buried under food from other tables. Malfoy himself was currently buried under a roast pig, sixteen loaves of bread, four sticks of butter, and a selection of sherbet the providence of which was uncertain, as dessert had yet to appear.

In the midst of it all, Hari was eating from his small bowl of rice and fish, unsullied by comestible projectiles. He was currently sitting on the pile of things covering Malfoy, apparently unaware of the war taking place. Sometimes, without apparent realization, he dodged a ballistic victual. Several of his housemates had taken refuge under the table and were using their wands to launch a concerted barrage of peas at the Twins, who were already coated in food, but apparently enjoying themselves immensely.

It took several minutes before McGonagall managed to return the hall to order, primarily by transfiguring all flying objects into water. Once everyone but Hari was soaking wet and covered in sodden food, she cleared her throat. "There will be a school-wide detention courtesy of Mister Malfoy for starting this fight." Professor Snape's mouth opened. "No, Severus, Mister Malfoy clearly, and in front of all of us, flung the first piece of food. Now Poppy, if you would please make sure that the students are uninjured. You can leave Mister Malfoy for last, since he was so enthusiastic about this fight."

Hari finished his food and proceeded to give his head of house a cheery wave before leaving the room.

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Hari made a short stop before going to bed early to see how many housemates tried to kill him.

(A/N John)

This story was expected to be short. Really short. Like I figured I'd clear all the way to fourth year (when things inevitably go off the rails if Harry is more competent) in about ten thousand words. Instead, I'm at about that much and I've finished the first week of first year. Somehow I should have known that my plans wouldn't survive contact with Spoon.

On the other hand, this is a lot of fun to write, which is the other reason it's going to keep going like this. I'm enjoying seeing how often I can make Spoon snicker.

(A/N John)

There's also the somewhat bash-happy effect on Malfoy and Snape. This was not planned, I promise. I honestly don't enjoy much bashing. But the problem is that those two are the slowest learners. Even Snape is going to catch on sooner or later. And, to be fair to Snape, he's right pretty much all the time and even has valid reasons for his position. It's just unfortunate for him that there's not much evidence and that Dumbledore is slightly senile and enjoying pushing things further out of line.

The Culling and Making Friends

Chapter 4: The Culling... and Making Friends

Hari had laid on the wall above his door and was wide awake when it swung open. The boy sneaking into his room met his foot coming the other direction and slammed into the wall outside the room with a wet thump. Hari shrugged and closed his door, wondering if that would be enough to ward off further visitors.

He was awake again when Professor Snape stormed into his room to find him lying on his bed, apparently asleep. "POTTER!"

"Mrg. Yes, Professor?" Hari blinked his eyes with "sleepiness" and yawned. "What can I do for you at this early hour?"

"Explain why Mister Boil is lying in a coma against the wall outside your room!"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Professor." Which was true. He was fairly certain he'd struck hard enough to kill.

"He's outside your room."

"Is his hair black, Professor?"

"Yes! Why?"

"Just curious, Professor. Besides, I thought you were giving me random facts about him." Hari swung his legs out of bed and rose. "I know it's a bit early, but I'm going to go to breakfast."

"It's two in the morning, Potter!"

"You woke me up, so I assumed that early breakfast was being served."

"I woke you up because Mister Dhal found him lying there."

"Odd," said Hari. "My room is at the end of a cul-de-sac. There're only rooms on this side of the corridor. What was Mister Dhal doing outside my room? Isn't he a sixth year and not a Prefect?"

"How did Mister Boil come to lie on the floor outside in a coma, Potter?"

"I thought I already told you I don't know. I'm much more interested in why there were two sixth years outside my room." He yawned.

"Since, as you pointed out, it is two in the morning, would you kindly go tend to your injured student and let me sleep?"

"No, Potter. You will come with me to see Professor Dumbledore! This is three attacks already. I'll see you expelled."

Hari shrugged. "Then if you would let me get dressed?"

"You've got your robes on, Potter."

Hari shrugged and allowed himself to be ushered out of the room, idly noting the splatter of blood where his victim had struck the wall. How frustrating. He would need to spend more time working with his Uncles if some idiot sixteen-year-old survived his kicks.

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Ten minutes and enough winding corridors that anyone but him would be totally lost later, he was standing in front of a particularly ugly gargoyle in an empty hallway. Granted, he could see past the wall and knew that there was a passageway on the other side, but still. He smothered his amusement as Professor Snape started shouting at the statue.

"Cockroach Cluster!" Nothing happened. For several minutes, the man devolved into mutterings about old coots who changed their

passwords at inconvenient times. Finally, he returned to his attempts. "Lemon Drop! Blood Pop! Fizzing Whizbee! Acid Pop! Klondike Bar! SNICKERS!" And on and on it went.

"Professor," said Hari, "did you bring me here so I could witness an exhibition of screaming at inanimate objects? If so, you've done nearly as well as my Uncle. Now can I go back to bed?"

"No!" Professor Snape kicked the pedestal the gargoyle sat on and began to hop up and down, clutching his foot. "OPEN YOU BASTARD!" There was a grinding noise as the gargoyle leapt down and stepped to the side, allowing the wall to slide open and a moving staircase to be revealed.

"Interesting password." Hari slipped by the hobbling Professor and rode the stairs up to a pair of heavy doors, which he pushed open. "Good morning, Headmaster."

"Good morning, my boy." Dumbledore twinkled at him merrily and Hari strangled the urge to kill the man for being so cheerful at this hour. "Severus, my boy," the man turned to Snape. "Why didn't you just try the password like a normal person? 'Cockroach Cluster' would have opened the door without putting on such a show. Really, do you need such a sense of drama?"

Hari smothered a snort of laughter as the Professor went purple and his fingers flexed. "You should really see a medic about that color, Professor." He could tell the man was just this side of a rant that would make Uncle Hidan proud. "Could you explain why I'm here instead of asleep in my bed?"

"Yes!" Snape began to vibrate with rage. "This boy, Headmaster, is responsible for three attacks on his housemates!"

"I am not," interjected Hari.

"He threw a needle into Mister Malfoy's eye!"

"I did not."

"Then he threw chicken into Mister Malfoy's other eye!"

"I thought it was part of a friendly food fight."

"And he attempted to murder Mister Boil!"

"I'm not sure how you came to that conclusion. Headmaster, if I may?" At a gesture from the man, Hari continued. "In response to the accusation of needle-attacking, I already replied that Mister Malfoy attempted to disembowel me six times and that I have at least as much evidence as his claims. The food fight was clearly Malfoy's fault, as he was punished for starting it. And I'm not clear why someone lying in a coma *outside* my room is my problem, but while we're on the subject, what was a sixth year doing outside my room anyway? It's not on the way to anything."

"All good points," said Dumbledore. "Certainly, I can dismiss the first two issues since they were addressed earlier. I do believe you spoke to Harry about them over dinner. But he does raise an interesting question that I would like answered: what was Mister Boil doing outside his room?"

"I have no idea, Headmaster," hissed Snape. "But it's his fault!" he declared, pointing at Hari.

"I'm a little lost here, Professor, Headmaster," said Hari. "But why is it my fault?"

"No idea, Harry," replied Dumbledore. "Severus?"

"It's *his* room! It must be his fault!"

"I see." Dumbledore nodded. "I'm sorry to see that your hatred of Harry's father has already begun to interfere in your professional demeanor, Severus. Harry, can you find your wake back to your room on your own?"

"Yes. Thank you, Headmaster." Hari rose, gave his head of hose a jaunty wave and proceeded to go to Fawkes. "Hey there. Sorry about the lightning." He got a cheerful sort of whistle in return and left.

As he closed the door, he heard behind him, "Honestly, Severus, could you be any *less* professional? Accusing one student of attacking another."

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Two days of classes affirmed Hari's belief that the other students just weren't trying hard enough. For some reason, all of them were determined to find that they had difficulties with the simplest spells. And they had a fixation on wands that was worrying him. If nothing else, Uncle Hidan made sure that he was aware they were waving around little penises. The way they all worried about the quality of their wands suggested a far deeper issue to his mind.

He was also certain that his most hated class was Astronomy. Not only did he have no idea what any of the stars looked like around here, but he also had to deal with the fact that someone decided that it was a good idea to hold the class at midnight. He didn't even have the death of someone to look forwards to as a way to alleviate his annoyance. He might be a night owl when he was on a job, but the rest of the time he liked to sleep late. Especially when he could sleep a whole four hours straight because his dad wasn't around to set him on fire if he did.

Though he was torn. History was impressively dull. On the upside, since the ghost teaching didn't pay attention, he hadn't bothered to show up since the first day. And of course Defense was interminable. If nothing else, he wished the stuttering man would stop trying to talk. It was annoying. Even Uncle Deidara didn't have such a frustrating verbal tic. He had his suspicions about the man, though,

because anyone in this culture where words were needed to cast spells would be dead if he tried to specialize in fighting and stuttered.

His fellow students were no longer surprised to find Hari already in the room when a class was supposed to start. Despite having never been seen in the corridors, he had demonstrated a mastery of the castle that was second to none except, perhaps, Filch. No one else had managed to not get lost on a regular basis. Of course, he got lost all the time, but only intentionally so he could explore some part he hadn't seen before. And he had the advantage that secret passages had their requirements written in magic-in other words, they might as well have instructions for him to read. He rather enjoyed the Byakugan.

And he was finally going to see what Potions class was going to be like. As usual, he was already in his seat when the others arrived. He had his feet propped on a cauldron and was apparently dozing. He waved at Daphne, who was one of the few students who seemed to tolerate his attitude. "Good morning," he said cheerily and in complete contravention of her instruction not to talk to her.

"Potter." She sat down beside him, knowing that her classmates would raise a fuss if she sat somewhere else and would thus subject them to being next to him (and thus in the line of fire of an annoyed Professor). "Do you think that there's even the slightest chance you'll manage to avoid losing points this period?"

"Of course... assuming Professor Snape acts in a professional manner and doesn't try to pick a fight with someone his intellectual superior."

"Are you defining yourself as an intellectual superior?" she muttered.

"Indeed."

"So we're losing points by the bucket then?" She sighed, resigned.

"Can a house go into the negatives?"

"I don't think so. I don't know if it's ever been tried."

"I don't know if we *can* lose more, then."

"Dear Merlin," she hissed. "I stopped looking at the hourglass a couple days ago. Are you telling me we're at zero?"

"Oh yes. Professor Snape seems determined to curb my politeness by means of punishing his house." Hari shrugged. "I'm not sure why this is a good plan."

"Doesn't he keep giving you detentions, too?"

"Well, yes. But I know better than to show up to them."

She shook her head and moaned. "I'm a virtual pariah, you know. Because I sat next to you on our first day, everyone assumes I'm your friend and treats me like it."

"Odd. Other than being polite to you, I'm not sure what could have given them that impression. Well, if it makes you feel better, you can be my friend."

"No it doesn't!"

"Oh well."

The door slammed open and Professor Snape stalked in.

"POTTER!" He was already turning purple. "Get your feet off the cauldron!"

Hari shrugged and lifted his feet so they were an inch off the cauldron. Snape twitched. He began to take roll with something resembling hatred of the English language. "Potter... What would I get if I mixed powdered wormwood and asphodel?"

Hari didn't open his eyes. "I don't believe the answer is in our textbook, Professor." He paused. "No. Nowhere. The only reference to wormwood is page two-twenty-five and it mentions the danger of

adding it to chocolate pudding." Another pause. "And no reference to asphodel at all."

"Twenty points for your cheek, Potter!"

"Just to be clear, sir, the cheek here is for knowing that the answer to a random question you posed is not in the text you assigned us as the one needed for this year in Potions?" Hari asked innocently.

"Should I have instead acted dumbfounded because I did not know an answer I could not have read without looking in advanced texts before my first ever class in a subject?"

"Where would I look for a bezoar?" growled Snape.

"Ah, that one I think *is* mentioned in the text. I believe on page four-thirty-one it says to buy them from the apothecary."

"Wrong!"

"No, I'm sure of my citation, sir."

"Showing your ignorance of magic, Potter. You would look in the belly of a goat!"

"Why would I do that, sir?"

"To find a bezoar!"

"But the text you assigned-

"What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"The same as the difference between either of them and aconite, sir."

"So you don't know! Fifteen points for failure to read."

Hari cocked his head. "But since the three are the same plant, I rather think I answered the question, Professor."

"Detention!"

"Wonderful. I needed something to do this evening. I'll enjoy avoiding it. Thank you, sir!"

Snape had turned dark purple and kept muttering for several minutes. "Instructions are on the board. Begin brewing!"

Hari turned to Daphne. "Is this a group exercise?"

"No idea."

"Well then, I'll work alone so that you might get graded fairly." Hari rose and proceeded to climb onto the backs of Gryffindors and walk from shoulder to head to the cabinet and retrieve ingredients before walking on Slytherins to get back to his desk.

He held out a small packet to Daphne. "Here. I got extras." She took them with a scowl.

Eighteen minutes into the brewing, Snape came over. "Potter!"

"Yes, Professor?" asked Hari as he carefully stirred the potion exactly one and a half times using his left foot.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm following the instructions, sir?"

Snape glared into the cauldron. "You're doing it wrong!" he declared, looking at a potion that so far was being made perfectly and exactly according to the instructions.

"If you say so, sir." Hari used his left hand to drop in three blue toad eyes (the eyes were blue, not the toads). The mix began to fizz appropriately. His free hand used a spare knife to spear a flying ingredient from the air and set it aside.

Snape gulped. That had been a bee stinger which, if it had hit the potion at this stage, would have coated everyone within ten feet with enough incomplete boil remover to turn each victim into a giant pustule. *He was right next to the cauldron*. Before he could finish contemplating just how close he had come to being turned into a sphere of pus, Hari flicked the stinger back in the direction it had come. The Professor barely had time to turn when he saw the cauldron in front of Mister Malfoy erupt. He was just thankful that he was more than ten feet away.

Hari had seen the eruption begin and grabbed Daphne as he leapt for the front of the room. "I do believe class is going to be dismissed in a moment." There was a boom as the spray hit other cauldrons, which filled the Slytherin half of the room with incomplete and tainted potion. "Now would be the moment." He ducked outside, dragging her along. "I don't know what will happen if we get hit with that stuff, but I'm betting it's bad. Uncle Sasori always says the worst part of poisons is making them."

With that, Hari strolled off, turned a corner and vanished for the rest of the day.

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When he turned up at dinner, it was to a round of raucous applause from the Gryffindor table. "All hail the Great Potter, destroyer of Slytherin!" cried much of the table, led by the red-haired twins. "Three cheers for Potter!" Followed by three loud rounds of cheering.

Dumbledore rose. "Congratulations, Mister Potter," he said. "In less than a week, you've done more for interhouse unity than I've seen in decades!"

"But Headmaster!" shouted Snape. "He set off a chain reaction in Potions that has the rest of his yearmates in Hospital!"

"To be fair," called Hari, "I only threw back something they had clearly lost. I thought they would want it returned."

When Dumbledore nodded, Snape threw his hands up in the air and began to scream in incoherent rage.

Hari sat down next to Daphne. "Will you be okay?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Because if they think you're my friend, they might try to kill you?"

"What?"

"Oh yes. I'm fairly certain at least two people have tried it on me already."

"What?"

"So do be careful."

"Eh. My family's rich enough that an attack on me would be expensive." She shrugged. "Besides, attacking an unmarried pureblood girl? That's just not done. We're too valuable in alliances."

Hari nodded. "Understandable. I think at least one of my uncles might agree. I can't be sure which, though. Maybe Uncle Sasori? He's good at politics."

Hari got up and walked over to Professor Snape, holding his bowl of rice and vegetables. "Are you okay, Professor?" he asked. "You haven't taken a breath in quite some time." When no answer was forthcoming, he paused and then jabbed his fingers into the nerves on the Professor's back. The man collapsed instantly.

"Ten points to Slytherin for care for head of house," said Dumbledore.

Hari lifted the man onto his shoulders and began to walk out of the hall. "I'll put him to bed."

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Itachi looked up when one of the crows flew into the tower and dropped a letter on his desk. It was thick parchment and rolled tightly. With a kunai, he undid the binding and began to read.

Dear Dad,

First, you won't believe what I learned! I blew up a Dark Lord at the age of one! He was terrorizing the whole community here, so that probably makes him A or S, right? Anyway, you've got to tell Uncle Hidan that I got my first kill before I was out of diapers!

Also, I figured out why that lady was looking like she wanted to eat Uncle Kisame. She can turn into a cat. I think she really did want to eat him-and not how Uncle Hidan was saying.

Tell Uncle Kakuzu I have more gold than him! I meant to write to tell you guys that before, but I was distracted. I estimated several metric tonnes of gold. So tell him 'haha' please.

Oh, oh! I've already had at least two attempts on my life. But they were so amateur I don't think they count. I'm planning to escalate to lethal if things continue, though. I thought I had, but the boy survived a kick to the head. I'm planning to step up my game.

And I found that my Defense Professor apparently has a soul on the back of his head. Isn't that what you said Uncle Pein removed for me? I keep meaning to ask the medic if that's a common thing around here, but I get distracted exploring.

Can you tell Tobi that he's right that being cheerful and friendly is hilarious? They really do turn purple if you keep at it enough.

Especially since my Headmaster is aiding and abetting my efforts. I think he knows most of what I'm doing and is just screwing with everyone.

Finally, I may have made a friend. She spends time with me because everyone thinks she's my friend and since they hate me, they won't spend time with her. I don't know if that counts.

Love from your son,

Hari

P.S. I think my head of house is going to have a brain aneurysm soon.

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Hari didn't bother going to sleep that night. Instead he simply lay in wait. When his door opened, he continued to wait until the barrage of spells stopped. Then he dropped down and gripped the heads of the two boys closest to the door and slammed them into the wall twice, making sure he felt brains splatter.

His foot lashed out, catching a third boy under the chin and sending him flying down the hall, skidding on the stone until he'd left behind a trail of flesh and his skull smacked into the ground, spraying gray matter.

Hari's fingers blurred and a dragon of wind formed in the hall and raced down it into the common room, tearing the three remaining attackers into ribbons along the way. He cleaned his hands on the robes of one of the corpses and returned to his room to lie down on his bed and fake sleep.

He was unsurprised by door slamming open two minutes later.

He yawned. "Hello Professor. Am I late for class?"

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Dumbledore let Snape continue until he repeated himself twice.
"Alright, Severus, I think I follow the gist of your point. Harry, my boy, could you shed any light?"

"No sir," replied Hari. "I was sleeping soundly when Professor Snape barged into my room. Again. I'm starting to get worried about his choice to visit a preteen boy early in the morning without warning or consent."

Dumbledore nodded and stroked his beard. "A fair concern."

"Anyway, the corridor was pretty badly damaged. But I'm not sure what that has to do with me."

"Also a good point. Well, Severus? Can you give me something to work with?"

"The boy is hated in the house!" Dumbledore made a 'go on' motion with his hand. "It must have been him!"

"Why?"

Snape paused. As much as he hated this student, he was torn. It would require admitting that he suspected the dead students were planning something nasty. Oh well. "I am guessing that the six students now in the school morgue, in a single barrel, no less, were planning to show Mister Potter the error of his ways. I find it hard to believe Potter's story, given that his bed looked like it had been hit with several blasting hexes."

"So, just to check," Dumbledore began and Snape just knew this was going to end badly. "You're asking me to punish Mister Potter for a crime we have no evidence he committed on the basis that his

motive would be fighting back against students you believe attacked him with lethal intent?"

"Well," began Snape. "When you put it that way, Headmaster, it *does* sound rather bad."

"Yes. It does, Severus."

"But I have six families I will need to make notification for! And two were seventh years!" Snape was nearly wailing. "One was the only heir to the Occludis line!"

Hari raised a hand. "Do you need me here, Professors? Only it's not even two in the morning."

"Sadly, I think we might." Dumbledore looked at Snape. "In point of fact, Severus, I believe two of them were from the Nonsuch family, so there are only five notifications to do."

"Not helping, Headmaster!" Snape sighed. "Potter, go to bed." He looked at the surprised faces. "I can see when it's a losing battle. It's not worth keeping him up when I know he's not getting in trouble. Go to sleep, Potter. And if someone else bothers you, could you please leave them alive?"

"Uh..."

"If you can't say yes, please just leave."

Hari turned and walked out. From behind him he heard a whine.

(A/N John)

I can only hope that some of you are at least mildly worried by Dumbledore's lack of interest in the deaths this chapter. I reply with the fact that this is nothing compared to another story I have in the works. This is a somewhat mild conception of how I

see Hogwarts running (sometimes) in that there are deaths every year. Magic is dangerous and often doesn't allow for healing of instantly fatal results. That being said, there have been more deaths so far this year than in most others in the school's history, hence Snape's upset at having to do the notifications. Besides, the majority of the deaths are usually younger students who are left to do themselves in before any time is wasted teaching them.

(A/N 2 John)

Spoon has informed me that someone is concerned that reading a new chapter will rip out stitches or something to that effect. So to the person who is having surgery, please don't read this chapter until it's safe for you to laugh.

Time Flies

Chapter 5: Time Flies

Things continued as they had, although somewhat subdued. The deaths of a half-dozen pureblood scions had a rippling effect in the house of the cunning. Power vacuums opened and there were viciously fought internecine battles for the positions left vacant. Hari watched them with the detached air of observation Uncle Sasori had taught him; he made note of the most likely candidates and occasionally sabotaged their efforts as he had learned so that they continued to struggle instead of stabilizing.

Sometimes, someone would try to gain an edge with an attack on the target of the Boy Who Lived, but those stopped when those who'd bragged that they'd see the brat a doing over vanished completely from the castle. There were no investigations anymore, as there were no bodies. Despite that, Professor Snape made it subtly clear that he knew Hari was involved ("You did it, Potter!"), but without evidence, he didn't even bother to drag him to Dumbledore.

All told, by the end of October, almost an even dozen Slytherins had shuffled off the mortal coil, nearly half that without leaving behind enough to say they were dead. Two wealthy families were left in quandaries as they found their heirs missing and could not move to declare new heirs without certainty of the current heir's death. One of those deaths had been carefully selected by Hari to ensure that no one in the house could manage to reclaim control of the snakes. The disappearance of a Prefect had caused some concern, but without reason to blame him beyond the fact that his head of house knew it, he was left alone. Perhaps of greater concern to the great and the good—which was to say the rich and the arrogant, was the vanishing of a pair of young women of marriageable age.

To the mindset of the pureblood community, women were not exactly property in the archaic sense any more than men were. But as

daughters of their bloodline, it was expected that they would marry to the family's advantage. As such, they were valuable. A good marriage cemented an alliance or linked two houses. The loss, therefore, of two women of good breeding was a terrible blow to their families. Hari had selected them less for that and more for their pending connection to those whose power he saw no reason to allow to grow. Uncle Sasori had been good about teaching him.

In less than two months, the entire leadership of Slytherin had been rendered impotent. No candidate stood a chance of rallying enough support to take control and things descended into chaos in which no one could really afford to worry about Harry Potter. No matter how much of a coup it would be to beat him, there were too many other problems of a more immediate nature for the older Slytherins to deal with that.

Dumbledore could be seen twinkling merrily at every meal, apparently unaware of the howlers screaming at him. The rest of the staff had taken to wearing earmuffs at mealtimes to deaden the sound a bit. The papers were strangely silent on the matter, apparently taking the view that the students had run off in some sort of excessively complex love-shape that Hari had yet to find in any two-dimensional drawing. He wasn't alone.

On a completely unrelated note: the Acromantula were eating well.

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Classes continued as they had for Hari. He continued to excel despite Professor Snape's best efforts. To date, Malfoy had been hospitalized fifteen times for various injuries without any punishment being issued to his assailant. Potions class was especially dangerous and two incidents had warranted twenty-four hours in the care of the mediwitch.

Other Professors gradually began to notice that Hari was failing to even carry a wand, let alone use it for classes. The fact that he seemed to have little difficulty with classwork only frustrated their attempts to understand what was going on. Even more frustrated was one Hermione Granger, who had taken to regularly informing Hari that what he had done was impossible, which was always ignored or answered with a repetition of the impossible task in question.

On the other end of the spectrum, Daphne Greengrass found that she was growing worryingly accustomed to Harry Potter's presence in her life—even if he insisted his name was "Hari" for some reason. She had discovered that he was able to help with classwork a little, although he kept trying to get her to stop using her wand. She had the horrible feeling she would end up doing so someday by accident and he would be insufferably smug for weeks.

On the upside, the chaos that enveloped Slytherin had meant that the first years were in flux. It had been expected by everyone that Malfoy would take up the mantle of command (as much as an eleven-year-old could manage). Without the upper years to enforce that, he was having to rely on his father, which impressed no one. Since he spent much of his time apparently injuring himself, he failed to gather the respect needed to capitalize even on his family's power. With the Malfoy heir failing to live up to the potential of useless lout, the Parkinson family was no longer pursuing a marriage alliance. That, in turn, meant that the originally presumed power structure amongst the girls in the year was thrown. It had been assumed that Pansy would take up leadership by virtue of a connection with Malfoy. With that gone, she was no longer the rising star, nor did she have to worry about being one.

Daphne had an advantage of sorts. She had been close friends with Tracy Davis before Hogwarts. During their first months, Tracy had distanced herself wisely. As a halfblood daughter of a death eater and a muggle woman, she could hardly afford the risk of being associated with Daphne and thus Harry Potter. Once it became clear

that those above them were too busy to bother with such things, she was more than happy to resume her friendship with the young woman who, in turn, was glad to have someone to share the oddness with in the hopes that it could be diluted. She was dismayed to find that it merely seemed to increase sufficient to supply both of them.

Because of the involvement of Davis, Daphne was the only person in the year with two friends whom she could count on. Though she was still unsure about Hari. The complexities of Slytherin meant that power was attractive to both those with daggers and those seeking shelter therefrom. Pansy, bereft of her position (grateful to not have to worry about being at the top) now sought protection, turning to the only member of their year with an existing alliance. The fact that this brought her into the orbit of Hari did not make her life any less complicated. With three of the four girls in their year aligned together, it was a natural result that Milicent would follow suit.

The boys were then faced with the problem that their nominal leader was absent or failing and half the house wouldn't answer to him anyway. Crabbe and Goyle had no choice but to stand by Malfoy because of their own familial responsibilities. Nott was stuck in the unenviable position of either submitting to the matriarchy that was forming as a de facto rulership in his year, or try and rally allies- which consisted of Blaise Zabini. The problem was that Blaise was a wildcard whose mother wasn't English and was rich enough (because of a series of truly unfortunate accidents that happened to her succession of rich, older husbands) that he didn't need to worry about the, as he called it, "petty, parochial fights of the English." He also had no problem with female authority, given that his mother was a formidable woman able to convince a succession of men to marry her despite the tragedies that followed her around.

The politics of the first year Slytherins thusly looked something like:

Hari-outlier

Daphne Greengrass-matriarch presumptive

Tracy Davis, Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode-ladies in waiting

Blaise Zabini-wildcard/knight

Theodore Nott-poor bastard out in the cold

Draco Malfoy-loser's loser

Vincent Crabbe Jr. Gregory Goyle Jr.-loser's loser's losers

Worryingly, Hari totally missed much of these developments. He focused heavily on the crippling of the upper years and had done enough careful damage to destroy any chance of them having much power for at least a year. While he did so, he hadn't really been paying attention to his own peers. As a result, by the time he could have noticed, he had spent several weeks in the company of four girls and sometimes Blaise and had registered it as the new normal.

His new friends, meanwhile, found that they had somehow ended up befriending someone who was currently competing with Albus-Many-Names-Dumbledore for weirdness. Like Daphne (and Hermione) they were constantly aware that their... friend... was regularly violating rules of magic and was explaining how they could do so as well. Since Daphne put up with him, so did they, and much like a fungus, he grew on them with a mix of youthful good humor and mature chicanery that reminded them of a Gryffindor... except that he didn't get in trouble.

X

X

"So," said Daphne over breakfast. "Halloween is tonight."

Hari cocked his head. He was having a bowl of dried fruit that had been rehydrated as part of cooking the rice that was also in the bowl. "I think I read something about that. Night of spirits where the dead walk or something, right?"

"Uh... yes," Pansy seemed a bit reluctant to broach the topic. "But it's also 'Harry Potter Day'."

Hari looked up. "Wait, wait. What?"

Pansy looked around to discover that her companions had apparently decided to allow her the joy of explaining the concept to their mercurial friend. "People celebrate it as the day you defeated the Dark Lord."

"Oh. I'm still a bit lost. I mean, it's badass that I killed someone at eighteen months, but I'm not sure how I did it or anything. I don't remember it—that's for sure. Didn't some of our housemates hate me for it or something?"

There was a certain amount of sheepish nodding. "Pretty much. But these days, everyone's busy." Tracy Davis looked at the other end of the table. As usual there was a gulf between the first years and the rest of the house, occupied only by the four boys who were unaligned with anyone. "And you've rather grown on us."

"We're all for power for purebloods and getting rid of mudbloods," added Pansy. "But considering what our house has been reduced to..." she was ignoring the glare Tracy was sending her way. "Well... let's just say that there might be some questions about the way our parents do things."

"You mean," said Millicent, "that we're not sure that it's such a good idea to be so cutthroat about everything that we end up gutting ourselves and becoming total nonentities within the Hogwarts community? Or allowing existing family politics to nearly stick us with Draco Malfoy as a leader of the house? Or the fact that even without Hari's drain on our points via *Professor Snape*, the man known for his utter bias for our house, that the older students are so busy jockeying for power that they've completely left everything else by the wayside and haven't noticed?"

"When you put it that way," muttered Pansy, "it sounds really stupid."

Hari waved a hand. "Can we get back on topic for a moment? There's really a day about me?"

"Yeah. Which just goes to show they've never met you," hissed Pansy. "They'd be more terrified than worshipful."

"I, for one, am glad. I suspect my mother prefers my father retired, thank you," commented Tracy.

"So, is there anything special about Halloween?"

The others looked at each other. "You could say that," replied Blaise mildly.

"Is that why the House Elves have been carting in pumpkins for the last week?"

"Probably."

"And the reason that Professor Flitwick has been distracted during class and conjuring floaty lights with little sentient creatures in them?"

"Again, probably."

"And why that giant moronic lump has been out killing deer in the forest every night?"

"Maybe?"

"And why Professor Stutterfaces has been bringing two Trolls into the castle?"

"It's possi-wait, what?" Blaise held up a hand. "Could you run that by us again?"

"Well, I know his name is Quirril or something, but I call him Professor Stutterfaces because-

"Yes, yes, we know. You've been calling him that since the first class. I don't think he was impressed." Blaise, like Daphne, had a mastery of dry tones that was second to none. "I meant the Troll part."

"Well, I don't know they're Trolls. I mean, I've only read about them. But they *look* like Trolls. He brought one of them to the corridor of not-really-dangerous and took it past the giant dog there. The other one is parked in his classroom, so I can only assume we're going to be covering Trolls this week..."

"Trolls."

"Probably."

"As in plural?"

"Yes. I think I went over that with you."

Pansy sighed. "It's just more evidence of what our parents have been saying for years: Dumbledore's gone round the twist."

Daphne nodded. She was still surprised that she had ended up in the position of power, considering how the year had started but she was happy to take what she could get. "Or, more likely, is up to something." She looked at the surprised faces. "The man isn't stupid. Even our parents know that. They always worry what he's planning."

"Actually, can we back up a moment," interjected Millicent. "What was that about a giant dog?"

"Yeah, that's the first thing in the corridor-of-not-really-at-all-dangerous," replied Hari as he finished his bowl of food. "It's got three heads like Uncle Pain's."

"Dumbledore has a Cerberus in the school?" grumbled Pansy. "I stick by my statement regarding him and twists."

"Anyway," said Hari. "I'll see you guys in class." He rose and walked out the doors.

"Every time he talks, I feel my life getting a little odder," muttered Pansy.

"Welcome to my world," said Daphne.

X

X

"Well class," said Professor Stutterfaces. "Today we will be learning about... Trolls!" he waved his wand and an illusion shimmered and faded, revealing a Troll in a cage. He glared at the nearly half his class that failed to react except to cover their noses in disgust. He'd been expecting a jump-scare or *something* from a bunch of eleven-year-olds. At least the other half of the class was appropriately shocked.

"Who can tell me the first thing to do when encountering a Troll? Mister Potter?"

"Kill it."

"No, Mister Potter."

"What? Why not? It's just a big, magically resistant creature."

"Yes. That's why, Mister Potter."

"But Professor, a length of metal moving at speed would kill it right?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"So kill it."

"But you don't have a..." he trailed off as the quill on Hari's desk turned into an iron spike two feet long. "But *most of the class* doesn't have projectiles at hand."

Hari subsided into offended mumbling as Stutterfaces walked the rest of the class through the steps for dealing with a Troll (run, hide, pray). He overruled several suggestions from Hari about various options for accelerated objects and appropriate targets. "And stop claiming lightning bolts are a valid option."

"Fine." Hari rose. "Clearly you're not much of a Defense teacher if your solution is to tell us to run away from anything." He walked out.

X

X

"He gave you detention," Daphne informed Hari when she sat down beside him for Transfiguration.

"Between him and Professor Snape, I have a busy schedule of not going to them."

"So no points in the hourglass at the end of the day again?" muttered Pansy.

"It's Hari," replied Tracy, as though it explained everything. It rather did.

"Will you be trying to pretend to pay attention in class this time?" asked Millicent.

"Are we still doing beetles to buttons?"

"Yes."

"Then no." Hari placed a button on his desk. It turned into a beetle and back. "I'm good. Any of you need help? No? Good." He rose and walked out of the room just as Professor McGonagall entered. "Good afternoon, Professor. I'm going to do something else. I left the button on the desk for you to examine."

She sighed. It was horrifying to learn that in addition to combining the sheer talent of his parents, he had somehow outstripped his father for complete disregard for authority.

"He *did* do it, Professor," said Daphne.

"Yes, yes," she muttered as she walked to the front of the class. "I can see Miss Granger's vibrating fury."

X

X

"I'm amazed," said Pansy when they met up with Hari for lunch.

"Oh?"

"She has to be the strictest Professor in the school and she doesn't even bother taking points off you anymore."

"None of them do," said Blaise. "Only Professor Snape does. I swear it's just a reflex for him."

"It's probably that I don't really care. It's a *cup* ." He snickered.
"Seriously. We don't even get it. Just our head of house gets to keep it in his office. Now if we were getting paid... my Uncle Kakuzu was very sure to teach me that someone else getting paid for a job was bad business. I'll catch you at Charms. Probably."

X

X

Hari was seated at his usual desk, eyes closed and feet up when they came in. He was also being orbited by several quills and a pair of books. And a most displeased Mrs. Norris. "We're doing levitation today," he explained when they sat near him.

"So I gathered," replied Blaise. "But you seem to be moving them horizontally as well."

"Well yes. Up and down was boring."

"That isn't supposed to be how one measures magic."

Hari shrugged. "Then it shouldn't be dull."

"Well done, Mister Potter!" Professor Flitwick was applauding even before he entered the room. He just took it for granted that Hari was going to have done the task before class began. "Note how Mister Potter has adapted to move multiple objects in different vectors. Though I ask that you please not try on living things without practice, class; incorrect casting of the spell might levitate only part of the subject-such as the heart."

Hermione Granger was livid. Hari ignored this on the grounds that as far as he could tell, Hermione Granger was *always* livid. Something about magic seemed to bother her.

"I'll bite," said Millicent. "How do you move multiple objects at once?"

"Want to?" Hari shrugged. "I mean, you have to be able to concentrate on them, but that's about it. If you poke that feather with your wand any harder, Blaise, you're going to move it with a piece of wood instead of magic."

Blaise shook his head. The group that found itself spending time with Hari had gotten used to the fact that he just *knew* things that he couldn't possibly know. Such as seeing without open eyes.

"Really. You should stop using the wand. It'll be easier to do multiple targets when you don't think you need to point at them."

"But that's how the book says to do it!" snapped Hermione from across the room.

"And therefore the book is wrong. Or just lying to impressionable girls. Maybe it was written by a pervert?" Hermione's hiss of breath was almost enough to make him smile. "But you must have a dirty mind to have come to that conclusion, Miss Granger. In a young girl like yourself, it's a shocking thing. Do your parents know of your deviance?"

The other Slytherins were snorting back laughter. Even Tracy, who had nothing invested in pureblood politics, found it funny when Granger flipped out.

"Anyway," continued Hari. "Regardless of your personal flaws, the fact remains that you have to choose between a book and your lying eyes. Between you, me, and the whole class, I know you'll choose your precious books over reality."

X

X

"Just go jump off the Astronomy Tower," the redheaded buffoon advised Hermione after class. "Seriously. No one likes you here. Go die."

"What a nice guy," Daphne muttered as Hermione ran by, sobbing.

X

X

Hari was about to take a bite of barbequed chicken (sans deep frying) when Professor Stutterfaces released the Troll. "How odd."

"What's odd?" asked Tracy.

"Professor Stutterfaces just released the Troll from class."

"Makes sense if he's done with it."

"On the second floor?"

"What?"

"Yeah. He's got it charging and mad now and has broken off. He's strolling to the Great Hall, if I had to guess. He's going to need a new classroom, though, since it's doing a real number in there."

"If we asked you how you know..." prompted Blaise.

"I'd lie. He's making good time. That 'secret' passage between the second floor and the entrance hall is useful."

"What passageway?"

"And now he's mussing himself up and..."

The doors swung open. Professor Sutterfaces stumbled into the room, disheveled and collapsed. "Troll! Troll in the dungeon!" He took a breath. "Thought you ought to know." Then his face hit the floor.

(A/N John)

So I decided that, what with one thing and another, I was going to respond to a review. Sort of. Mostly I feel that I'm going to sound like a broken record. I fiddled with the timeline. The Uchiha Massacre happened shortly after the Kyūbi attack, such that Sasuke is about one-ish at the time. Itachi is also older so that he can be his canonical thirteen at the time, instead of five. Again: I am aware of the changes I made. I made them. These are not typos. Thank you.

(A/N 2 John)

Right, now that I got that out of the way, let me get to what I actually wanted to get to: on request from several people...

well, I tell a lie. It's not so much that you lot have been asking for it so much as that Spoon then asked me to-she informs me it was so you would stop asking. I decided to write up the scene where the Akatsuki get the letter from Hari.

(A/N 3)

I do hope that whomever it was in my readership who was worried about his or her stitches read my warning in the last chapter. Thank you.

Chapter: Omake 1

Around the time of the Slytherin Reorganization

Itachi accepted the letter from the crow and nodded to it. He silently regarded the roll of parchment, considering if his son would have decided to trap it. The room was silent. Normally, Itachi and a silent room would not be worth mentioning, but given the rest of the Akatsuki were also in the room, sitting at a table and discussing plans...

Pein cleared his throat. "Itachi, if you would care to share with the class?"

Itachi looked up. "Hari sent me a letter."

"In the middle of a full meeting," noted Konan.

"Apparently."

"Well?" prompted Pein.

"I was contemplating whether my son would have included any surprises."

"Let me help with that." Kakuzu scooped the parchment from Itachi's hand and gave it to Hidan. "Open it."

"What?" Hidan snapped. "You think Hari stuck something nasty in there and so you want *me* to get hit by it?"

"Yes."

"You're a bastard, you know," Hidan said as he undid the wax and string closing the roll. "Huh." He looked down at the unfurling bundle. "I guess he—" and was engulfed in a fireball.

Kakuzu was busy snickering as Itachi grabbed the letter before it could burn with the crazed cultist and Kisame slammed the man into the wall with a water jutsu.

"Sorry," he said, laughing. "I guess I over did it."

Pein sighed and turned to Konan. "And this is why we don't have full meetings in person."

"What does Hari say?" asked the blue-haired woman.

Itachi skimmed the writing. It was definitely his son's and had all the proper signs to show it wasn't under duress and even the one that they'd post-hypnotically implanted to make sure of mental control. So he was paranoid. He was also alive and liked his son to stay that way too. His face, normally expressionless, somehow shut down anyway.

"Hn."

"That's not an answer."

Itachi turned to Kakuzu. "I shall get the easiest part out of the way first. 'Ha ha'."

Kakuzu blinked. "What?"

"My son asked me to tell you that."

Kisame poked Itachi's shoulder. "Gonna need a little more there."

"He said that it was because he has several metric tonnes of pure gold."

Kakuzu's eye twitched. "If you weren't going to seal me into that jar of yours, I would seriously consider killing your son, Itachi." He dodged the fireball that flew across the table. "Warning acknowledged."

"Indeed." Itachi looked over at where a soaked, charred Hidan was working his way back to the table by dragging himself. It appeared that the burns had done damage to his nerves and so it might be a while before he was back on his feet. "My son also wished me to convey that he got his first kill when he was an infant." He glanced down at the page again. "He estimates that it was an A or S-ranked ninja involved in a country-wide guerrilla campaign."

"What the fuck!" snarled the struggling immortal. "That is so not fair! I call bullshit!"

"Leader-sama," continued Itachi. "When you next see Tobi, please inform him that my son has decided that his method of being polite is highly amusing."

"Heaven help us all," muttered Kisame.

"Also, Leader-sama, he mentions that his Defense instructor has something that he thinks might be a soul attached to the back of his head. He enquires if that was what you encountered when he was young."

Pein blinked a few times. "Yes. That's not supposed to be possible." He paused. "Leave it to your son to find a second example of it, then." He paused a second time. "You should probably tell him to look into that. It could be bad."

Itachi sighed and closed his eyes a moment. "My son says he keeps meaning to and gets distracted."

"Dear gods," muttered Kakuzu. "It really *is* another Tobi."

"We're going to go insane, yeah?" Deidara muttered.

"Indeed." Sasori looked at his annoying partner. "Though I am unsure that some of us are able to still go insane."

"What are you implying, yeah?" hissed the blond.

"Kisame," Itachi went on, "apparently the woman who kept looking at you really *did* wish to eat you. She transforms herself into a cat."

"No wonder Samehada kept telling me to hit her..."

"And my son says he made a friend."

"Yeah?" Kisame raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, he says that she spends time with him because people think they are friends and since they hate him, they won't spend time with her."

"Close enough."

Itachi sighed again. "Not really."

"Hey, it's more than I had!"

"Because," said Kakuzu, "you're a fish-freak and a violent maniac?"

"Probably."

(A/N John)

So there you have it. I have no idea offhand what Hari stuck in that letter, since I just decided to have Hidan get hit. Spoon felt sorry for him, so I had Kisame put him out. For some reason, this didn't help.

Killing Trolls Not Boredom

Chapter: Killing Trolls Not Boredom... or Grasping Magic By the Dong

Dumbledore rose and fired off a concussive hex that shook many first years from their seats and knocked the cutlery from the tables. It also cut through the sudden panic. "As tempting as it is to send the students to their common rooms, I suspect that sending two houses to the dungeon where the Troll is might be bad." He smiled. "So instead, the Professors will be heading out hunting." He pointed at most of the senior staff and they trouped off in groups of two.

"If the rest of you would continue eating, there's no reason to worry." He sat down and proceeded to dig into a plate of ham and turkey with gusto.

"That could be a problem," murmured Hari.

"What?" Pansy was looking at him with a certain growing dread that this was going to be bad.

"The Troll has headed down the second floor corridor."

"And?"

"Well, the teachers are headed for the dungeon for the moment."

"Yes?"

"There's a girl's bathroom on the second floor."

"Okay."

"Granger appears to be inside it, sobbing."

"Still not seeing the problem here."

"Well, I figure it might be a good deed for the year if I keep her from dying. She annoys me, but if I killed everything that merely annoyed me..." Hari rose. "Who wants to come?"

His friends looked at each other. Daphne decided to answer for them. "None of us. Seriously," she went on. "We'll let Dumbledore—" she ignored Pansy's pout "-know that the Troll is upstairs so you'll have backup. We're not crazy, Hari." She turned to Pansy. "We don't have to like the man to be aware he's a massively powerful wizard charged with our safety-no matter how lax he seems."

Hari nodded. As unadventurous as it was, they were remarkably sensible civilians. Uncle Kakuzu told stories of ripping off heads of those civilians who decided to 'help'. "Fair enough. I'm not sure what backup I need, but eh." He paused. "I notice none of you are trying to dissuade me."

"Hari," said Blaise calmly, "you're insane. You might be our friend, but there's nothing we can do to stop you. Besides, the Headmaster made it clear there's even a grave out back for people who get themselves killed, so it's not like the school isn't prepared."

"That said," interjected Tracy, "please don't die."

"If he did, it'd make our lives a little less crazy," muttered Pansy.

"Meh. My dad would kill me if I died before him." Hari gave a jaunty wave to the head table and walked out the double doors at the entrance to the hall.

"Did... did Dumbledore just wave back to him?" hissed Tracy.

"Uh-huh."

"Round the twist," repeated Pansy.

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Hari hummed to himself as he walked through two secret passageways and up a staircase that apparently led to the dungeons. It was shorter than the route the Stutterfaces had taken. He was also walking on the walls to keep from getting bored.

It was funny, really. He didn't exactly hate Granger because that would require caring enough about her. He just found her silly, stupid, and annoying. He had to admit, though, that this was at least in part because she was twelve. What little experience he had with people around his age had led him to believe that he was unusual (although his new group of friends might well be on their way to his version of normality). And here he was, heading to save her life. He could run, but he was making better time than the Troll. It kept stopping to hit the walls.

His father had told him to protect girls. Civilian ones, anyway. Kunoichi were on their own. Uncle Hidan objected, but that was because Uncle Hidan thought everyone should die. Most of his Uncles were in agreement with his father. Uncle Pein certainly was, and Uncles Deidara and Sasori sometimes. Uncle Tobi-most of the time-was the type to save every princess he saw. Even Uncle Kisame thought that women were supposed to be protected if they were civilians. Okay, maybe not actually *protected*, but he didn't actually *aim* at them. Most of the time. On the other hand, his Uncles had a near pathological hatred of children, having all declared that one was enough, thank you very much.

There was a scream as the Troll kicked in the door of the girl's bathroom. Hari dropped out of the illusionary part of the ceiling and landed just inside the bathroom. There was probably something wrong with a school that had secret passages into the ceiling of a girl's bathroom. Then again, usually the passage led to the oubliette.

"Turn around please," he said. The Troll whirled, club raised. "Thank you." False Darkness exploded from his hands and blasted the Troll off its feet and into the wall, destroying sinks and filling the air with electrically charged mist as Hari kept up the attack, using one hand

after the other to fire more shots to drive the Troll almost a foot into the stonework.

"Let's be sure, hm?" He waved his hand, turning a piece of the debris into a steel spike a foot long and hefted it, flinging it into the Troll's head, pinning it to the wall through its skull.

"Did you kill it?" the small voice sounded like it had been crying.

"Yep." Hari grinned and turned to face the girl, eyes close as usual. "I'm hoping Professor Stutterfaces shows up so I can show him I was right."

Hermione poked her head around the side of the stall she'd been hiding in. "Lightning and a spike in the head?"

"Exactly. Good memory there." Hari leaned against the wall. "Oh good, the faculty are on the way. I wonder how many points Professor Greasy will try and take from me this time? I mean, we're at zero, so I can't imagine it'll do much..."

"Why don't you care about losing points?"

"Do you actually want to know?" asked Hari. "Or do you just want to tell me I'm wrong."

Hermione sniffled a little. "Both? Or at least both if your reason is bad."

"Fair enough. I don't care about the cup. It's really about that simple, honestly. It has no value except to show that we got it. So what? Besides, considering how many points I lost for being polite in my Potions class, I find that it pretty much killed any interest I might have had."

"I..." Hermione paused. "I knew that you were right. I remember all our books. It was wrong." It was clearly costing the girl to admit that the teacher might be wrong to punish someone for being polite and

correct. She took a deep breath. "I should care about the points. They're a way to show I have worth. But... but they're about pride in my house. I hate my house. It's supposed to be the house of the brave and the good, but they're all petty and small minded and mean!"

"I wanted to be in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw because Professor Dumbledore was in that house and he's the greatest wizard in recent memory. And all the books I read say that Gryffindor is the house of the light and good wizards come from it. But no one likes me. It's just like school before! I tried to be helpful and people got mad because I knew how to do something they were having trouble with!"

"I hate my house. They pick on me and no one has a kind word for anyone who isn't like them. I'm smarter than my peers, just like always, and they hate me for it, just like always. I didn't *want* to be smarter than them. I didn't ask to have eidetic memory! But it's not like I can shut it off. And instead of asking for help or even letting me be helpful, they berate me for it!"

"It's the same everywhere I go. I try to be helpful and instead of even politely telling me to go away, they're *mean*. I mean, I don't think I've ever had a friend, at least not one who isn't an adult! And now the whole house at my boarding school hates me and I have to sleep in the same room as those petty, spiteful girls I've always had to deal with!"

Hari's eyebrows were climbing as her voice rose. She was crying again, but at least it wasn't all self-pity anymore. Anger he understood. Bits of debris were whipping around the room as she began to shout.

"I just wanted to find a place where people were like me!"

It was only Hari's quick reflexes that saved him. He lashed the bits of porcelain out of the air as everything airborne burst into shrapnel that flew away from the enraged girl.

"Tell me something," he said as the tinkling died away. "Did you need a wand to do that?"

"What?" she snapped.

He gestured to the ruins of the bathroom. "It looked to me like you were levitating what I'll call a hundred pounds of miscellaneous detritus and then turned it into a giant fragmentation device." He smiled. "*Did you need a wand?*"

She looked around. "That was me?"

"Yes."

She looked around. "I guess I didn't." Her eyes rolled back in her head and she would have landed face first in the shards on the ground if he hadn't caught her.

"So a girl's fainted into my arms. Dad still has me beat by three years. Oh well."

"MISTER POTTER!"

He turned, Hermione in his arms still. "Yes, Professor?" he asked mildly of the cat-lady who was looking more than a little harried. "Oh, hello Professor Snape, Professor Stutterfaces."

"Twenty points from Slytherin, Potter," hissed Snape. His heart wasn't in it though. He sighed. "For whatever it was you did."

"I killed a Mountain Troll, Professor Snape." He turned to Stutterfaces. "Can you guess what I used, Professor?"

The glare he got was impressively dark for a man who usually jumped at his own shadow. Or just about anything, really. "Sheer, dumb luck?"

Hari made a 'tsk' sound. "No, no, no, Professor. I used lightning and a transfigured spike flung at high speed." He watched as

Stutterfaces' fingers twitched.

"What were you doing here, Mister Potter," asked Professor Cat.

"Do you really want to know, Professor?"

"I wouldn't have asked, Mister Potter."

"Killing a Mountain Troll and saving a student."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "YOU WHAT?" the cry came in triplicate.

"Shhh," he nodded down at Hermione. "She's fainted. I'm trying not to wake her." Professor McGonagall twitched a little. "I should take her to the medic and..." Hermione was levitated out of his arms.

"I think I shall do that," Professor McGonagall was nearly snarling.
"You have detention tonight."

"That makes three, right Professors?" Hari looked over at the other two Professors. "Wonderful. To avoid making anyone jealous, I shall ignore them equally." He crouched and leapt straight up, vanishing into the apparently solid stone of the ceiling.

"Did..." McGonagall looked at her colleagues. "Did he just jump into the ceiling."

"I can't even be bothered to take points," grumbled Snape. "It's not like there are any left to take. Not even his idiot father and that band of monsters you had, Minerva, managed to get to zero, let alone *Maintain* it for two months!"

X

X

Hari strolled into the Great Hall. Professor Dumbledore was drinking a cup of tea and gave him a cheery smile. "Welcome back, Mister

Potter. Can I assume that the Troll is no longer a threat?"

"Do Mountain Trolls normally survive being blasted by multiple lightning strikes and then nailed to stone by a spike to the head?"

"Not usually, no."

"Then yes." Hari sat down with his companions.

"You killed it?"

"Well yes." Hari blinked. "I mean, I went over how to kill one in class. Honestly, I think I over did it."

"Killed a Mountain Troll?" asked Blaise.

"Yes."

"Killed as in dead?"

"You heard Professor Headmaster, right?" asked Hari. "He said they don't usually live through spikes to the head. And I only did that to be sure. It was already dead."

"Are you really surprised, Blaise?" asked Daphne. "It's Hari."

"True."

X

X

The next morning, the talk of the castle was the fact that Harry Potter had singlehandedly saved a student and killed a Mountain Troll. Even the Gryffindors had a hard time complaining-although most of the younger years voiced the opinion that it would have been nice if he'd waited until Granger had been killed before Hari got to the Troll.

Since classes had been canceled on the grounds that several Professors were busy tightening wards to prevent Trolls from wandering the halls and at least one classroom was currently under repair until such time as the minor flaw of a broken wall could be mended, Hari disappeared until lunch.

During that time, he was wandering the outside of the Astronomy Tower and found no less than seven secret passages that led to various parts of the dungeon. And one that led to the girl's side of the Slytherin dorms. He was pretty sure that wasn't supposed to happen, but since to find it, one needed to walk along the walls of a stone tower, he wasn't certain that it was something anyone else could find.

X

X

At lunch, Hari decided to try something new. So he sat down at the Hufflepuff table between several first years.

"What are you doing here?" asked the redhead he recalled being something like Bones. Her tone wasn't accusatory, just confused.

"In a few moments? Eating lunch."

"Yes," murmured her blonde friend. Priest something? "But I think what Susan was asking was *why* are you eating here?"

"Why not?"

"Because you're a Slytherin?" asked an older boy across the table.

"And?"

"So you're supposed to eat with them."

"Strangely enough, there aren't rules on that." Hari picked up his bowl of rice and began to eat. "So I thought I would see what it's like

over here." He leaned back, balanced on the bench and sighed. Conversations started up around him and he enjoyed just letting them talk without even the chance of his involvement.

X

X

His afternoon was spent in a similar manner. He wondered what the giant pipe-tunnel behind a girl's bathroom was for, sealed with some sort of other-language password-snake? Didn't Uncle Pein speak snake?-but didn't find it interesting enough to try opening it. Instead, he found three routes from the dungeons to the kitchens, one of which led to the ovens. Hari wasn't sure about that. He got the feeling that it probably had ended in a corner or something originally.

X

X

At dinner, Hari was sitting with the group that had somehow ended up stuck as his friends. They were in the middle of a discussion of the house-specifically its lack of points and prospects for changing that state of affairs, when Hari suddenly stood up and trotted over to the double doors.

When they swung open, Hermione Granger found herself grabbed by the arm and towed to the Slytherin table. She was surprised to find that her feet really didn't touch the ground until she was standing in front of a bunch of green-trimmed people who looked even less happy to have her there than her yearmates in Gryffindor.

Pansy glared. "What's she doing here?"

Hermione looked at the hand holding her arm. "Loathe as I am to agree with Parkinson... I'm wondering the same thing."

"Oh, right." Hari pointed to Hermione. "You guys always get so difficult about wandless magic. I figured I'd show you her, since she can do it."

Hermione blinked.

"We discussed it yesterday, don't you remember?" Hari poked her forehead. "It's in there somewhere."

"You mean the accidental magic?"

"You blew up a bathroom."

"By accident."

"So? Now you just have to learn to do it on purpose."

"But I'd get in trouble for blowing up bathrooms!"

"Firstly, if I'm anything to judge by-

"You aren't," chorused his friends.

"-then you wouldn't get points taken away, let alone anything else," Hari finished, ignoring the interruption. "Besides, I think you're taking my words too literally. I didn't mean that you should learn to blow up bathrooms, just not rely on silly bits of wood."

"But... but wands are-

"Irrelevant, yes," interjected Hari. "Glad you agree. Now sit down and have dinner. Your first lesson is tonight in the common room, just after lights out."

"But... but..." Hermione was trying to pick a place to start. "But I'm in Gryffindor. You can't have lessons in the common room."

"Eh." Hari sat down and picked up his chopsticks. "That applies to other people. I'll see you after lights out."

Hermione threw her hands up and stormed off to the Gryffindor table.

"Why do you want to teach her?" asked Daphne.

"Really? Because I'm trying out a new teaching technique."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm going to ignore her objections and make her learn." Hari smiled at his friends. "If it works, I'll use it on you guys."

The others looked at each other and shared a shiver of dread.

"N-no need," said Pansy.

"You don't have to put yourself out," added Blaise.

"It's no trouble," replied Hari. He paused, eyes closed, and cocked his head. "Incoming."

Hermione stormed back over. "Will you teach me to fight?"

"What?" Hari's tone was surprised-something his friends had never heard before.

"Teach me strength. I'm tired of being picked on! I want power so no one can do that," she pointed at the Gryffindor table where the younger years were jeering and the older ones just looked confused and suspicious, "to me again!"

Hari shrugged. "Sure." He looked over at Tracy and Pansy. "Budge over."

"No!" snapped Pansy.

She was suddenly shunted over. "Wasn't asking."

Hermione sat slowly, a bit shell-shocked.

"That could be an issue," commented Hari, head to one side.

"Her sitting here?" grumbled Pansy.

"The redhead idiot is suggesting that your roommates throw you-or at the least, your things-out the window tonight."

"*I hate Gryffindor,*" snarled Hermione. Tears began to form in her eyes. "I want out!"

Blaise smirked. "Spoken like a Slytherin."

Hari snapped his fingers. "That's an idea."

"What is?" Blaise sounded wary.

In answer, Hari waved his hand and the trim on Hermione's clothes shimmered, turning gold and red into silver and green. "Welcome to Slytherin, Granger."

Daphne blinked. "I don't think you can do that." Hermione nodded through her stunned look.

"Is this going to turn into another of those arguments where you tell me I can't do something and I do it?"

"No!" growled Hermione. "But you really *can't* change someone's house. Once the Sorting Hat Sorts someone, that's it! It's in the rules and everything!"

"Ten points to Hari Potter for his extension of interhouse friendship," called Dumbledore from the high table. "I'm sure Miss Granger will be happy in her new house."

"But... but..." Snape began.

"That's final, Severus," said Dumbledore. "The House Elves have already moved her things into the new dorm room."

Snape grinned broadly. "Maybe we'll actually have some points!" he crowed. "Or at least I'll have points to take from Potter." He began to dig into his food with greater enthusiasm as Minerva started to argue with Dumbledore to try and keep the single highest point-scorer in her house.

"That didn't just happen," declared Hermione.

"It did," replied Pansy in a dark tone. "An actual mudblood in the house. What is Hogwarts coming to?"

"Its senses?" asked Tracy. "She's top of our year-well, not counting Hari. But we don't count him for anything reasonable."

"You'll get used to it," Blaise took one of Hermione's hands from across the table and patted it. "I have a feeling you're getting sucked into Hari's orbit. Reality has only a vague relationship with him and we're on the outskirts of it."

"So lessons tonight," said Hari. "School work can wait."

"No it can't!"

"Wasn't a request."

"You're being awfully bossy today," commented Daphne.

"Normally I don't care enough. But I'm *going* to be teaching Granger wandless magic." He looked over at Hermione. "Once I break you of your habit of thinking books are all-knowing."

X

X

Hermione woke in her unfamiliar bed to Hari's face two inches from hers. Her shriek was muffled by his hand. It took her a minute to get her bearings and realize she was in her new bed in her new room in her new house, courtesy of Harry Potter. For some reason, his

housemates all called him "Hari" if they called him anything other than muttered complaints.

"Common room in two minutes," he ordered. Then he was gone.

She decided it was a bad dream and rolled over. Two minutes later, her ankle was locked in a vise grip and she was dragged from her bed, down a hall, and into the Slytherin common room. She came to a halt, face stinging from its travel over a carpet, a stone corridor, and another carpet.

"Up we get." Hari's voice was amused.

Hermione sat up, clutching her nightclothes around her. "Am I going to find myself being mocked?" she growled.

"Nah." Hari was seated on the ground by the warm embers of the fire. "But you *will* be learning." He held up her wand. "Without this."

"Give that back!"

"Do you know what it is?"

"A wand!" Hermione tried to grab it and found that Hari was suddenly not in reach.

"Well yes," admitted Hari. "But do you know what a wand is?"

Hermione stopped her scramble, and entered into her discursive mode. "Vinewood and dragon heartstring. In the more general, a wand is a magical focus for much of the European magical community going back to the Roman conquest of the British Isles."

"Close." Hari smirked. "It's a symbol for a man's penis." He pointed to the wand. "It's a giant facsimile for the male genitalia. Grasping it is like grasping your magical cock and stroking it until magic ejaculates out the end. So tell me, Granger, I know you're a deviant, but do you want to be giving handjobs to your magic? Or do you want to learn to cast without a wand instead?"

Hermione's eyes were wide and her mouth was working, trying to get sound to come out. Finally, she managed. "WHAT?"

"Fine, fine," Hari said. "Let's set aside your sexual fantasies. Do you want to be holding a dick every time you cast a spell?" He was snickering. "Here, let me make it easier." The wood flowed and shifted until it was shaped like a graphically accurate dildo. "This is a wand, Granger. Do you want it back?" He tossed it to her and watched as she dodged instead. "No? Good. Let's begin." Her wand shifted back into its normal shape. "Sit."

Hermione glared at him. Then, slowly, she sat.

"I know you have a photographic memory, so whenever you think of using your wand, just remember what it's been." Hari smiled. "Good. Now, first thing I have to do is show you that books are wrong."

Hermione sighed. She'd been through too much in the last two days to bother keeping any remaining secrets from this crazy boy. "It's because of my memory. I remember every book I've read. What's the point of having them in my head if they're not right?"

"You grew up normal, right?" Hari asked.

"If by 'normal' you mean 'without magic', yes."

"Right, well I was doing some reading recently. And I came across some history books. You've studied science, right?" She nodded. "So tell me, how many things that were *known* turned out to be completely wrong in every respect." He watched as she mumbled to herself for almost five minutes. "I wasn't asking for a list, Granger." He smiled at her blush. "Can we say it's a non-zero number? Good. So let's accept that magical books are similar."

Hermione looked down. "So they're all wrong?"

"Well, I'm not sure about the Potions books. Just the stuff about needing wands, really." He pointed to a pebble on the carpet.

"Levitate that. If you haven't managed it, I'm going to whack you with your wand." He smirked at her shudder. "Good. Begin."

(A/N John)

So, another chapter done. I'm aware the title of it is somewhat juvenile, but I wanted it to be ridiculous. I think I succeeded. It felt like the silliest term I could use.

Anyways, so now we see Hermione being drawn into the insanity that is Hari's world. And he *will* be teaching her wandless magic if he has to horribly traumatize her to do it. I worry about his mindset, I really do.

(A/N 2 John)

A word about Omake in our fics: unlike "Outtake" an Omake actually happens. It's canonical.

(A/N 3 John)

I suspect chapters will be a bit slower soon. I've been writing ahead of our published chapters, but we're publishing faster than I'm writing. Then again, I plan to finish this fic. How did it grow to twenty thousand words and not even be done with first term?

Maybe the Troll Would Have Been Easier

Chapter 7: Maybe the Troll Would Have Been Easier

It was the strangest week of Hermione's life so far. That included the week in which she found out that she was a witch and went shopping in a district that was still cobbled and had a bank run by Goblins. In spite of the strangeness of Hogwarts in general, somehow Harry Potter managed to outstrip it all.

She spent several hours that first night getting whacked on the head with her wand, which did nothing but gross her out. And then her sleep wasn't exactly restful because for some reason (she couldn't *think* why) her dreams kept being plagued by strange boys hitting her with penises-odd that.

Hermione was grateful that Blaise had apparently decided to adopt her, since she would have been horribly lost trying to find the Great Hall in time for breakfast. She had just about learned her way from the tower, but this had absolutely nothing in common with that path.

"You waited for me?" she asked him as he walked her through a solid wall that turned out not to be.

"Yes." He turned around in a circle and then opened a door and stepped out onto a landing she'd never seen before that had only a staircase going up. She could see over the edge of the rails down to the entrance hall a hundred feet below.

"Not that I'm complaining, but why?" This was getting more and more surreal. Not only was she walking through an M C Escher painting, but the boy had offered her his arm like some sort of gentleman.

"Because I'm a nice guy?" Blaise gave her a half grin. "No, seriously. You're new to the house and as one of Hari's friends, I feel a certain

obligation to help someone who has been forcibly dragged into his sphere of insanity."

"I think you mean 'influence'."

"No, I don't." Blaise patted her hand where it rested on his arm. "You're going to have to get used to the fact that the boy who is sort of in charge of Slytherin instead of Daphne-if he bothered... or even knew-has a certain... warping aspect. Things don't work quite right around him. And he's decided to infect you. The least I can do is help you find your way around."

"Uh..." she watched as they emerged from a doorway she'd never seen in the entrance hall. They had been walking upwards the entire time. "Thanks?"

"Besides," he added. "My mother would *kill* me if I were anything less than a gentleman to a young lady." His smile was as close to roguish as an eleven-year-old could manage, white teeth flashing in the dark tan of his face. He gave a half-bow and opened the door for her.

Hermione found herself blushing slightly for no reason as he ushered her to a seat in the clique.

"Good morning, student," offered Hari. He hadn't looked up from his bowl. "I trust you are ready to tackle the day without using a penis?"

"What?" snapped Pansy.

"Do you really want to know?" hissed Daphne.

"Probably not."

"Thought so."

Blaise gave Hermione a look of confusion at her mix of flush and green. "Will I regret asking?"

"Yes." Hermione covered her face with her hands. "I regret knowing. And I can't forget it."

"Alright then." He began to fill a plate.

"What are our classes?" Hermione asked. "Today, I mean. I know there's Defense this afternoon, because it's with Gryffindor. But what else is there?"

"Double Transfiguration before lunch," grumbled Tracy. "Twice the time for me to hear from McGonagall that I should be able to get the mouse into teacup already."

Hermione's mouth had barely opened when Hari's chopsticks smacked her in the forehead. She had a momentary flash of disgust before realizing it wasn't her wand. "What?"

"If you want to help someone, less lecturing and more helping," he advised. "Try asking to see what she does and offering advice based on that."

"You mean like you do?" she growled.

"No." He placed his bowl on the table and watched it vanish. "For one thing, you won't be hitting her with a penis." She twitched. "But also, you're teaching something she has a grounding in." He paused. "Though maybe you shouldn't? It'll just be more things I'll have to have her unlearn when I teach the rest of them."

"Do. Not. Ask." Hermione glared around at the rest of the people who in one day somehow moved in and taken the position of 'people I talk to' which was closer to friends her own age than she'd ever had. But she wasn't going to answer questions about that statement he'd made.

"Didn't plan on it," muttered Tracy. "I don't think we want to know."

"Good. So, after Defense?"

"Hm? Oh!" Blaise nodded. "Right. We've got free period and then dinner and Astronomy at midnight."

"One day, I'm going to level that tower just so we don't need to take the class again," Hari commented. "Blow that fucker to pieces."

Hermione looked aghast. "Destroy part of the school?"

"Of course!" Hari looked surprised. "Why not? Anyway," he suddenly grew more serious, "we need to break you of thinking that things like that are important. If I didn't worry about your virtue, I would send you to spend time with Uncle Hidan and Uncle Kakuzu."

"You get used to those comments," interjected Blaise. "Hari is normally pretty polite. And then sometimes he'll curse a streak so blue a sailor'd blush."

Hari grinned. "And my dad said I shouldn't spend time with Uncle Kakuzu."

"I'm sure he was right," replied Daphne, her voice dry.

"Eh. I'll see you in class."

X

X

Things continued much like that for the rest of the week. Her nights were a mixture of being beaten about the head with a piece of wood she kept remembering as being genitalia and just not sleeping well. Her days were classes and school work, both of which were much harder without her wand. She had yet to manage a single spell.

Thursday night-technically it was Friday morning, but she hadn't slept and was coming to the decision that until she slept, it wasn't the next day yet-she managed to levitate the pebble out of sheer anger. It got easier; each time she managed, Hari swatted it out of the air and told her to do it again without being mad. She didn't manage

that, but she *did* hit him in the face with the rock once. He didn't seem to realize, which only upset her more.

His name was another thing she had to get used to. For some reason, his group of friends called him "Hari". It took her a few days before she found herself doing the same, though she had no idea why.

Come Friday morning, she was sitting at the table with the rest of the people who were her not-quite-friends (and Pansy, who was still rather cold towards her. But she treated everyone like that, so Hermione wasn't too worried) and working to levitate a fork so she could try and fling it at Hari.

"Granger!" a voice shouted directly behind her. The fork, which had been wobbling, stopped moving as she shrieked.

When she whirled around, Professor Snape was standing there, hands on his hips and glaring. "I'm going to ask you a simple question, Granger. While you could no doubt give me a lengthy answer, please confine yourself to the minimum verbiage required to communicate with me. Why have you scored no points this week?"

Hermione blinked. "What?"

"You are trying too hard to comply with my instructions, it seems. While I appreciate the brevity of your statement, it has failed to convey sufficient information." Snape sighed. "Granger, I know you're bright. I also know you have a fine memory and working ears. Therefore, I shan't repeat myself." He glared at her some more.

"I heard you, Professor," Hermione replied. "But I'm not sure I understood it properly."

"Ah. Perhaps I need to put it more simply?" Snape sneered at her. "What is the reason that you have not had any house points given to you this whole week?"

"Um... because I haven't earned them, Professor?"

"Yes, Granger. I am cognizant of that. Now can we get to the heart of the matter? WHY?"

"Because I haven't cast any of the spells in class, sir."

Snape twitched. "POTTER!"

Hari looked up, eyes closed. "Yes, Professor?"

"This is your fault!" declared the bat-man. "I don't know exactly what or why, but this is your fault! She's spending time with you." He threw his hands up in the air. "Next, Miss Granger here will tell me you took her wand away from her or something equally ridiculous."

Hari smiled. "Wow, Professor!"

"What?"

"You got it exactly right!"

"I what?"

"Well, pretty close anyway."

"Wait. What?" Snape paused. "No. No, no, *no!* You did *not* take away Miss Granger's wand. That did *not* happen!"

"I didn't."

"Good." Snape sighed.

"She gave it to me and doesn't want it back."

Snape let out a scream of anger and whirled to look at Hermione again. She was half-cowering. When she didn't say anything, Snape snarled, "Well?"

"Um..." Hermione looked down, blushing. "I don't want to talk about it, Professor."

"Potter," said Snape in a suddenly calm voice. "Give Granger her wand back."

"NO!" shouted Hermione.

Snape stared at Hari. "HOW? How did you take the highest-scoring student in the history of the school and completely destroy that?"

"Talent?"

Snape's shriek of primal rage rattled the tableware and caused several first years (and some NEWT Potions students) to wet themselves. He threw his hands up in the air, then turned away and stomped out of the hall.

Hermione glared at Hari. "Did you just make me a major aspect of a Professor's meltdown?"

"Nah," Hari waved a hand dismissively. "He's just upset. He hasn't tried to kill anyone, so he's not at meltdown level yet." He shrugged. "I mean, I've only got my dad and Uncles to go by, but meltdowns usually involve lots of corpses."

"This is not making me feel any more comfortable here."

"I'm sorry?"

The rest of the group shook their heads.

X

X

Week after week of classes continued apace. Hari frequently skipped classes without apparent pattern (except for History, which he just skipped) and explored the castle instead. It frustrated

Hermione that he didn't seem to fall behind anyone despite his only occasional attendance. He usually showed up to Potions because there was always classwork, but he had a knack for failing to be present about half the time theory was the topic of the day-except for those times he didn't. Hermione had pressed him for his reason and had been thoroughly distracted by his discussion of a minor aspect of transfiguration that had been discussed and by the time she remembered her question, he had disappeared. Again.

Hermione was working hard at the theory and homework parts of her classes. It wasn't that she had neglected them before, but now they were her only chance of passing a class, so she was working to squeeze the best possible grades out of each of them instead of working to demonstrate her total command of the topic. It came as a pleasant change to Professors who had resigned themselves to seven years of tome after tome on simple questions and multi-volume responses to more complex matters.

Slytherin had settled a bit-in as much as it was possible for the house to settle when its power structure was in shambles. The elder years were trying to get something resembling command of the house back. While they might have individual power, the sort of rule that they had expected to enjoy during their tenure as upper years was gone with their leadership. The younger years were only mildly better off. The thing was that above first year, power structures had sort of settled and so everyone was scheming to get ahead. It didn't help that the students were in their most impulsive years-plans might be poorly thought out, but enough of them working against each other made for an admirable amount of chaos. The Weasley twins were failing to help by making sure that they pranked Slytherin upper years on a regular basis.

Daphne found that Hermione was a strange addition to her little fiefdom. She hadn't planned to be queen, but was going to work with it. The newest addition to Hari's orbit had an independent streak, but was uninterested in power. The combination meant that while she didn't fit into the model of a Slytherin house, she also was pretty

much removed from the possibility of involvement. Plus, Hari was slowly teaching her how to teach, and Daphne was glad of Hermione's memory and sharp mind to help understand their classes.

Blaise had continued his interactions with Hermione as they had been. He was courteous, gentlemanly, and mildly roguish. The overall result was a gallant young man who flirted outrageously- technically it wasn't flirting yet, but he was practicing to improve his skill for when it would be. He apparently had made a sort of game of seeing if he could get Hermione to blush at least once a day-only sometimes by embarrassment.

X

X

"So, Christmas is next week." Pansy had somehow found that she had the duty of introducing topics to Hari when they needed to be. Holidays, for example, were a complete mystery to him.

Hari didn't look up, but made a 'go on' motion with his chopsticks.

"I think all of us are going home to our families," prompted Pansy.

Again, only a motion.

"And while we may have become... fond of you, against our better judgement, our parents might not be so happy to see you."

Another motion.

"And Hermione said that she would invite you, but she's going to be going to her grandparent's house and they won't be ready to deal with 'something like you'."

Motion.

"What Pansy is trying to get through to you, Hari," said Millicent, fed up, "is that we will all be going home. You will not be coming with us. We are making sure you understand that. And that you will not be upset or surprised."

"Oh." Hari paused in his eating. "Alright then."

"You could sound a little upset." Tracy pouted.

"I *could* do many things." Hari finished his meal and set his bowl down to let it vanish.

"Whatever," grumbled Pansy. "He's informed."

"Will you be going home for the holidays?" asked Hermione. "I don't think anyone brought it up."

"Nah. We don't celebrate Christmas."

"Technically, we don't either," pointed out Daphne. "The muggleborn do, true, but most Wizard families stick with Yule or something similar."

"But we do the tree-and-gifts thing," noted Tracy.

"Well yes," Millicent replied. "They're fun."

"Gifts?" asked Hari.

"Traditionally, gifts are exchanged," said Hermione.

Hari nodded. "Alright then. Hello Professor."

Snape had walked up behind Hari. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Potter," he began. "Please fill out the form required to visit your family over the upcoming break."

"No thank you, Professor."

Snape sighed. He had already begun to resign himself to having Potter around for what was usually a peaceful period in the chaotic year. The fact that this was no doubt penance for his many bad deeds did not in any way make it better. "Alright." He turned and walked off. He did, however, take forty points from a first year Hufflepuff for being "too happy". It wasn't his best work, but when she burst into tears, it made him feel a little less like he wanted to strangle someone.

X

X

"Good bye, Hari," said Hermione.

"Continue your exercises," he instructed as he watched the first year Slytherins board the train. "I expect progress when you return."

"How do I progress?" snapped Hermione.

"By going forward?" Hari absently backed away from her random swipe with a book and returned to the castle.

(A/N John)

So, being insane, I have apparently decided to maintain my current rate of chapter production by typing over dinner with Spoon over my shoulder. I swear, the demon there didn't need help. Seriously. The number of times she suggests something and tells me she was joking after I decided to run with it... It's her fault Mrs. Norris was one of the things Hari was floating back then.

Forgive the ramble. Anyway. What can I say about this chapter? I really enjoyed writing Snape's interaction with Hari and Hermione in this chapter. Spoon says that was the point he broke. I say not so and that he's mostly just keeping up

appearances (although I think he was genuinely enraged this time).

(A/N John 2)

Finally, we reach Christmas break, something Spoon had suggested I cut to weeks ago. Things happened, okay?

(A/N John 3)

A note about Blaise. I'm just amused by his flirting. I honestly am unsure if anything will come of it. But he was raised by his mother to be a bit of a rogue. Perhaps the way to think of it is that she's a strong, self-asserting woman with a guilty pleasure in reading romance novels and decided to encourage her son to act like a hero from one of them. I hope that helps understand him a little better.

John Out

Christmas and Gifts

Chapter 8: Christmas and Gifts

Hari woke to an interesting discovery Christmas morning. The feast the night before had been pleasant enough, with food that he could stand. At least the sweets had been edible. But this morning he found a pile of packages at the foot of his bed (which had yet to be repaired after the earlier incident). He had felt the Elves in his room. After the first week or so, one of the Elves had approached him normally—that is to say, on foot—and explained the concept of a House Elf to him. It had taken time to adjust to not attacking them, but he managed to avoid actually killing any of them and the rest insisted that it was still better than what most masters would do because they were excessively bored.

The packages near his bed did not surprise him too much. He had people who were pretty close to friends and that meant that they were probably getting him presents for Christmas. He would have to find a way to get them things. What was more surprising was the package at his feet on the ceiling. He shrugged and detached the object, dropping down to the floor and slowly opening his presents.

Mostly it was a collection of magical things from the Far East. It was nice to see that Millicent had found him a proper tea set. It went well with the green tea Pansy had gotten him. Tracy had sent something she called a "No Mask" that apparently could disguise someone's face. It looked like an ANBU mask, but without detail. She said it came from a curio shop. From Daphne came a Hand of Glory mounted in a paper lantern. Her note said that if he was going to wander around after hours, she might as well make sure he got back in one piece. Blaise's gift contained a small, porcelain figurine of a cat that gleamed with magic in Hari's sight. Supposedly, it was enchanted with mild luck magic. He was unsurprised to find that Hermione had sent him a variety of books on magic in languages he

didn't know. He resolved to look into fixing that, since she *did* know books, even if she obsessed a bit.

There was also a small gift from Professor McGonagall containing a few pieces of chocolate and the mentioning that she was glad to see that he was following in his father's footsteps as a prodigy in transfiguration-although she wished he might not have inherited the hellraising aspect. Hari wondered how his father could do transfiguration, although he was very good at raising hell. And Professor Snape had sent him a miniature hourglass filled with green stones. The note said "please."

That left the package that said something about his father leaving it in possession or something. It was signed, "Totally Not Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore." And then, "P.S. This is definitely not an invisibility cloak." Followed by, "P.P.S. Big Wink." Hari opened the package and had the strange sensation of seeing an object that he could in no way see through and at the same time didn't see at all. Even the impenetrable parts of the castle had a vaguely see-through quality to them. This also gave off no magic at all.

Hari decided that only Professor Beard would sign something like that and put the cloak on.

Ten minutes later, he finally stopped the evil laugh he learned from Uncle Kisame. Barely.

X

X

Breakfast was different Christmas morning. The key change was that there was only one table, deference to the fact that most of the students had gone home for the holidays. As such, Hari found he was sitting at a large table, listening to the grumbling of the redheaded moron complaining about having to eat with an evil snake. Professor Snape seemed equally pleased-although he

apparently enjoyed taking a steady stream of points from the boy for his comments.

Gred and Forge were playing with crackers, searching for some sort of prize. Hari was amused by them because he could see inside all of the little devices and absently selected the one that had a straight, single-edged sword. There was a look of abject terror on Snape's face when it popped out that was quickly subsumed by a look of pure resignation. Hari ripped a piece of tablecloth free (earning a cry of outrage from a hidden House Elf) and transfigured it into a sword belt. The twenty points he earned from Professor McGonagall were quickly taken by Snape for "possession of a deadly weapon in addition to your wand, Potter."

The meal came to a nominal end when Dumbledore swapped his pointed hat (purple with moving silver stars that sometimes jumped free of the cloth) for a ballcap with firewhisky slotted into holsters above each ear and a pair of tubes leading from the bottles to his mouth. Professor McGonagall threw her hands up in the air in disgust and Professor Flitwick had to excuse himself, stumbling as he laughed himself silly. It didn't help that Dumbledore conjured a giant blue hand with the index finger pointed out and put it on.

Hari rose from the table. "Professor Dumbledore," he said. "I'm going to be taking a field trip to England."

"Alright, but be back before curfew," Dumbledore replied. Then he winked hugely.

"Headmaster!" Snape cried.

"What seems to be the problem, Severus? I told him to be back by curfew."

"But he's *eleven!* Besides, you made sure he saw you wink." Snape had his head in his hands.

"Nonsense, Severus."

"Professor..." began Fred.

"No, Messrs Weasley," replied Dumbledore mildly, "you may not take a field trip. I daresay you leave school grounds often enough... during Hogsmeade weekends."

"Aww."

X

X

Hari returned to the castle after dark with a satchel over one shoulder. He didn't bother sneaking and just opened the main doors and walked into the entrance hall. "Nice of you to join us, Mister Potter," hissed Snape.

"Actually, I was thinking of having an early night, Professor."

"I don't think that's possible at four in the morning, Potter."

"A late night of it, then?"

"If I asked where you have been..."

"I would lie, yes."

"As I thought. And if I issue a detention..."

"I would ignore it, again you are correct."

"I see. Alright, why not. Where were you?"

"Visiting a high-end brothel so I could work off several months of blue-balls by doing the hookers there until all of them sang my praises."

Snape pressed a hand to his forehead. "Okay. And, for the look of it, detention."

"I shall ignore it promptly, Professor."

"Yes; I thought you would. Do please keep the bloodshed to a minimum, Potter."

"Good night, Professor."

X

X

The next morning, Hari strolled into the Great Hall and sat down at the table to his morning bowl of fruit (something that the rest of his schoolmates, almost to a student, could not understand).

"Mister Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "Might I enquire why you are not wearing the school uniform?"

Hari looked up from his food and shrugged. "It's vacation, right? I think the school uniform code is suspended."

"Relaxed," she replied. She gave him a looking over. His hair, at least, was normal: long and pulled into a low tail at the base of his neck with bangs covering his eyes and, indeed, much of his upper face. It was very different from his father, but at least it was used to it by now. But he was wearing flat sandals, black pants, and a white button-down shirt. None of that on its own was remarkable, though he wasn't wearing a tie.

"I think this is relaxed," he commented. He fiddled with the gloves on his hands. Technically, they were variants of cestuses. Fingerless gloves with metal plates on the palms and backs. Although these extended halfway up his forearms as bracers on their outsides.

"You have no robe on, Mister Potter." She had decided not to comment on the short, cylinder of wood strapped to the back of his waist or the one against his right shoulderblade.

Hari went back to his food.

"Professor Snape?"

"Yes?"

"Did you already give him detention?"

"Not for tonight."

"Good. Detention, Mister Potter."

"You don't expect him to show up, right?"

"Of course not."

"Can we skip," began Gred.

"Our next detentions," continued Forge.

"Professor?" ended George.

"No, Mister Weasley, Mister Weasley, you may not." McGonagall glared at them until they shrank into their seats. "If you attempt to, I will have your hides tanned, dyed, and used for my new tartan. Then I will tell your mother."

"No, no," said Fred quickly.

"We'll be early," George promised.

The youngest Weasley began to mutter about self-entitled slimy snakes until Professor Snape decided to alleviate some aggression by giving him detention with Filch for the rest of the holidays.

"Remind me why we didn't go home?" Ron asked Percy.

"Because mum and dad would rather leave me and the twins here and visit Charlie in the middle of Romania, surrounded by Dragons, in the dead of winter, than be around you."

"It's true," added Fred.

"They left behind even perfect Percy because they don't love you," added Gred.

Ron began to sob.

X

X

Hari walked calmly up to the top of the Astronomy Tower. He had decided to skip the "normal" route and just walked up the side. It still puzzled him that Wizards thought gravity was something they had to accept. At the top, he unslung the satchel over his shoulder and stuck it to the side of the telescope that protruded. It was mainly used for NEWT studies, the rest of the students had to make due with inferior devices using purely mechanical aides.

As he balanced on the lens, he pulled a long metal pole from the bag. Then more bits and pieces were extracted and he gradually began to put them together, finally slotting the magazine into place and operating the bolt. He'd never used a rifle before, but he'd watched the soldiers at the base practice and the basic principal seemed simple enough.

He was a bit puzzled why this was supposed to be difficult. He could see the whole area that was the effective range of his new toy, so aiming wasn't hard. No matter where he pointed the barrel, he could see the trajectory, just like a kunai. Well, sort of. Without having seen it fire enough, he could only make guesses. Hence his presence up here.

Hari pointed the rifle at the Acromatnula colony he'd been using to dispose of unwanted persons and pulled the trigger. If he hadn't fought Uncle Kakuzu in a melee, the kick of the gun would have knocked him over. He was trying to understand raising it to his shoulder when he could aim from his hip just as easily. Instead, the

kick didn't even move the weapon. A tree next to the spider exploded as the .50 caliber round turned a cubic foot of wood into splinters.

It took several more shots before he was able to properly aim the gun. His Byakugan had to learn the flight patterns of the small projectiles-small compared to kunai and senbon, of course. He had to swap out for a new magazine before he was reliably hitting his targets. A few dead Acromantula weren't going to make a dent in the forest population.

He was planning to go down and explore the castle a bit before ceiling, but before he could leave for sleep, he spotted a cloaked figure come out of a hole in the ground at the edge of his Byakugan's perception, deep in the forest.

Five minutes of watching later was enough to confirm that this person was not a good one. There was something sinister about his chakra and there was a naggingly familiar deformation of the network. He knew he should be able to place it, but it wasn't coming to mind. More importantly and definitively, the person had just gutted a unicorn and begun to drink from the wound.

Yeah. That wasn't working for him. The barrel swung around and then a bullet flew into the forest, slamming the cloaked figure to the ground, spraying the dead magical horse with gore and shredded organs. Then the figure scuttled for the hole it had emerged from. Missing most of its chest cavity. Another round destroyed its left leg at the hip before it was gone into the tunnel.

Hari disassembled the weapon and tucked it away before jumping to the ground.

X

X

Two days later, Hari had expended all his stolen ammunition and decided that he would most definitely *not* be introducing these to

ninja. It took all the skill out of it and the range it was capable of was just disgusting. If ninja could strike from those distances, no one would be able to do anything but hide in bunkers.

That didn't mean he wasn't going to make use of it for himself. When needed. If he found something too dangerous to hurt properly. Besides, the gun wasn't as much fun.

Once again, he had informed the Headmaster that he would be taking a field trip for the day and been given only a cursory punishment by Professor Snape. It had been a profitable adventure, too. Well, he'd found lots of fun toys, anyway.

While he was out he went "shopping". Of course, ninja only paid money for things while under cover or in allied villages. So he mostly just took things that he thought would make good gifts for his friends and Professors.

X

X

"Hari Potter Sir!" chorused the House Elves when Hari slipped into the kitchens. "We's be making sure yous gets fluffy rices!" The spokself broke out of the horde busy cleaning, cooking, and so on. "Does you have complaintses?"

"Nah, Wilbury, you've been doing fine with things. Fish and vegetables are fine. I could go for some beef tonight, though." Hari had enquired about the House Elf names. The answer had been totally incomprehensible-and that wasn't taking their... unique speech patterns into account. Wilbury served as the elf who spoke to someone when people came to the kitchen. He had volunteered to sacrifice himself, giving up working during times that humans were present so that someone could actually have a vaguely normal conversation, instead of talking to a dozen squeaky voices at once, all of them offering food. The spokself was also responsible for managing the kitchens and generally having to do less fun work and

more boring and unpleasant master-y tasks. It was a very important and respected title.

"Okays," Wilbury waved to an elf, who came scuttling over with a tiny ball of mochi. Hari had brought samples of things he liked back from his last expedition and had given them to the House Elves so they could figure out how to make them. "So what can wes do for yous?"

"I have some gifts to give out, Wilbury." Hari took out a small trunk from his pocket and emptied it onto the floor. "Can you get these to the right people?" He ate the mochi.

"Sure, sure." Wilbury waited a moment. "Is it good, Hari Potter Sir?"

"Oh yes. You continue to outdo yourselves down here." Hari gave the elves a wave and strolled up the wall and into one of the secret passages in the ceiling. This one went to a corridor on the second floor, on the other side of the castle. In theory, it passed through the Great Hall. It didn't.

X

X

Professor Snape woke up and looked at the small package on the blankets over his feet. He didn't often get many presents for Christmas; most of the people he'd been close to were either dead (Lily) or not people he really wished to remain friends with (everyone else). He usually got a small something from Dumbledore, and Minerva could be relied on to provide him with a bottle of something strong enough to ease the pain of working with children after the break. That was about it, really. It was sad that his Christmas gifts were from a mentor and a co-worker, but of all the sad things in his life, it was one he'd rather earned. So what was this?

It was barely the size of his fist, wrapped in the generic paper that the House Elves used when someone just left gifts out. It was

addressed in House Elf handwriting as well. It was one of those silly, giant tags on a piece of string hanging from the bow.

He undid the bow and opened the box. Inside was a small note.

Professor Snape, he knew that handwriting. It was Potter's.

I realized that you got me something for this "Christmas" thing and I didn't do the same. I felt bad about it, so I thought while I was out of the castle, doing whatever it was I wanted to, that I could at least stop off and get you a little something.

Under the note was a bezoar. Under that was a receipt from an apothecary in Diagon Alley, with the name of the store circled in green ink.

"Well played, Potter."

X

X

Professor McGonagall woke up to find a small box on her nightstand, wrapped in House Elf wrapping. She'd gotten gifts from everyone she'd been expecting to get something from already, so who was this?

Inside the box was a note.

Professor McGonagall, I realize I have been making life rather hard for you recently. Since I was out of the castle anyways, I thought I could get you a little something to make up for it. I hope this helps you relax a bit.

Under the note was a small, toy mouse that smelled of catnip. Her eye twitched. She also noticed her right hand had batted at the thing without permission.

X

X

Professor Dumbledore accepted the box from the House Elf. He wondered what Hari had gotten him. Inside the box was a note.

Dear Professor Headmaster, I was out and about and thought of you, so I thought I'd get you a little something.

Under the note was a small bag of lemon drops. When Dumbledore upended it into his candy dish, his desk was lost in a sea of muggle candies of various types. The elderly wizard blinked back tears. It was the sweetest gift anyone had ever gotten for him.

X

X

Professor Sutterfaces opened one bleary eye. He was still missing most of his chest cavity after something had happened to him while out in the woods. His Master was thankfully as stumped as him about what had done this, or he would be in even more pain than this.

He had been too injured to go to Madame Pomfrey. She would have asked questions that he couldn't answer. Especially when she found unicorn blood in his system. He'd had to buy potions by owl from sellers in Leeth Alley, a place known for its pharmicon specialists.

Healing was slow going. He had no idea what had done the damage to him, but it had managed to leave behind no trace of its magic, so he'd had to go with generic healing options instead of specialized, targeted treatments. Regrowing a limb was *not* turning out to be any more pleasant than he'd expected.

At the foot of his bed was a flatish package, wrapped in House Elf wrapping. Who would send him a gift with the name... "Professor Sutterfaces"... well. That answered that.

He hit the thing with a battery of detection spells and found only a mild enchantment for levitation. Shrugging, he undid the wrapping and found a note.

Professor Stutterfaces, I thought you might like a little something this holiday season. I got the nicest one I could find because you're always so nervous. I hope the decorations will help you calm.

Under the note were a pair of hand mirrors. When he lifted one, the other flew around to the back of his head and floated there as the image in the mirror in his hand shifted to show the rear of his turban. There was a second note under the mirrors.

I thought you might like to be able to look yourself in your other face as well. The mirror is enchanted for people who do their own hair, so it will show the back of your head where your second face is.

Professor Stutterfaces looked at the mirror again in horror. It had unicorns around the outside.

(A/N John)

I had not really planned on bashing Ron in this fic. It just kinda happened. The fact is that I'm not a huge fan of him most of the time. But I still hadn't intended to go this route. But it just kinda left itself open. In this case. Fred and George had talked Percy into pranking Ron because he was being exceptionally annoying. They didn't really think he'd do it, nor that Ron would take it so badly. Besides, they thought he was owed a little bullying after Hermione-even if she annoyed them, she shouldn't have been driven that far.

(A/N John 2)

So many of the things in this chapter are Spoon's fault. The chief one is the hat Dumbledore is wearing. That was her idea when I tried to think of a properly silly hat. Actually, I think that

might be about it. Oh, and the unicorns around Quirrell's [sic-talk to Spoon if this is spelled wrong] mirror. That was her, too.

(A/N John 3)

I should note that while I do most of my own proofreading, Spoon offers an extra pair of eyes. And she handles spelling names. I generally just gave up on bothering to learn how to spell them. So any names wrongly spelled are her fault.

The Joy of Family and Gifts

Chapter 9: The "Joy" of Family and Gifts

Hari decided to spend the evening exploring. The wonderful thing about the castle was that no matter how much of it he found, there always seemed to be a bit more for him to discover. It was fun. He was fairly certain that he had in his head a more complete map of the castle than anyone but perhaps the House Elves. He wasn't sure about that, since he didn't know if they actually *knew* the castle layout, or just knew where they were needed and went there.

At the moment, a corridor had made itself known on the fifth floor that he was pretty sure he hadn't encountered before. Certainly, none of the three thousand, two hundred, ninety-six and four-thirteenths secret passageways he knew of led to it (the fraction was because there were passages that were only intermittently extant and the fractions added up quickly).

There was only one door in the corridor, and he couldn't see through it. That happened often enough. It was mildly annoying to be as blind as normal people, but usually once he'd explored an area, the castle let him see into it as long as unexplored parts weren't in the way. Otherwise, his Byakugan was unreliable. It was weird.

Without anything better to do at one in the morning (he was adjusting to having things to do at night-it meant he was learning to operate on less sleep than he had. He suspected that this was how many ninja managed to switch from sleeping late except in special circumstances. He resolved to savor those chances as his more advanced professional instincts were now making themselves known.) he pushed the door open. Inside was a large, almost-empty room. There was an ornate mirror in the center.

"Hello, Professor Headmaster, sir," Hari said in a conversational tone as he walked towards the mirror.

"I call bullshit," replied Dumbledore as he faded into normal sight.
"Mad-Eye Moody couldn't see me like that."

Hari gave him an enigmatic smile and turned to the mirror. "Hey, cool!" He gave the image he saw a look again and then nodded.
"That's something to aim for. Headmaster? Does the magical world have a way to give someone a third eye?"

"What?" Dumbledore blinked for a moment. "Oh. Yes. I suppose it could be done. You'd want a skilled medical mage to do the job and it would be expensive, but it can be done."

"Sweet! Now I just need to figure out how to make another of Uncle Pein's eyes!"

"Might I ask what you saw?"

"In the mirror that shows not my face, but my heart's desire? Sure. I saw my dad saying he was proud of me surpassing him completely. And I had a third eye with Uncle Pein's Samsara Eye."

"So you know what the Mirror of Erised does?"

"Well, I can make a guess or two."

"It does rather explain itself, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Just one question: does it tell the future?"

"No, Harry, it just shows you what you'd like to see."

"Ah. Powerful genjutsu then." He nodded. "Devious trap, that." Dumbledore's twitch went by him as he looked over the Mirror. "I think I can see some of how it works written into the edging. Not enough, though. I really need to study magic writing, or whatever it's called."

"Runes," Dumbledore was perfectly happy to get away from the trap thing.

"Right. Well, it's an interesting mirror. I'll aim for what I saw, of course. But I guess that's what I'd been planning before."

"Good morning, then, Harry. By the way, thank you for your gift. It was lovely."

"Not a problem, Professor Headmaster sir."

X

X

Slightly more than a week of exploring had failed to net a single interesting thing. Beyond the usual contents of the castle, of course. Lots of passages everywhere, for one thing. He'd found a cup with a cross on it in a back room. The thing had nearly blinded him with its magical aura before he managed to tone down his sight a bit. He'd left it where it was, next to a gem-hilted sword.

He had also found a room with a rather nice bed and, carved into the wood frame in inch-high letters, "Padfoot" and "Prongs" and tick marks under each. The room looked like it hadn't seen use in around twenty years, judging from the slight fading of the colors in the fabric (dust was a useless measurement when House Elves were in the area).

The castle had failed, however to yield anything trying to kill him. Moving staircases didn't count. He'd even found one staircase that would move to catch falling students. He was fairly certain that hitting marble at falling speeds wouldn't actually be better than doing so a second or two later, but perhaps he was missing something. It had come as an unpleasant shock when he'd jumped from a bannister and discovered a staircase swooping under him without warning.

X

X

Speaking of without warning... Hari found himself accosted by Dumbledore on his way to breakfast one morning. The old man was smiling broadly as he intercepted Hari and walked with him into the Great Hall.

"I wanted to commend you, Harry," he commented as they made for the table.

"Oh?"

"Oh yes. You looked once at the Mirror of Erised and turned away."

"And?"

"Many haven't managed that. Men have wasted away in front of it, trapped by their own desires." The man gave a twinkle at him and went to his seat.

Hari mused on the oddness of the encounter as he sat and served himself fruit from the platter in front of him. He absently took a bite of melon. "Where's Professor Sutterfaces?"

"I believe Professor Sutterfaces is in convalescence," Dumbledore replied across the empty table. "He reported that he had gone on a short trip during the Holidays and encountered some sort of unpleasant magic the nature of which means he can't be attended to by our resident mediwitch." At Hari's blank look, he went on. "He's recovering in his rooms after being nastily cursed and is possibly dangerous to those around him until he's better."

"Ah."

"Ah indeed." Dumbledore waved as McGonagall came into the Hall and joined them. "Minerva!"

Hari looked up as several Professors entered and began to dine. He focused on his food for a time.

"Madame Pomfrey?" he asked suddenly. Since he was also now directly beside her, she gave a little scream and threw the jam across the table, where it struck Gred in the forehead. He clutched at his skull and screamed theatrically as red goo dripped down his face. "Can I ask you a question?" In the background, George was asking 'are you alright, brother? Don't head towards the light!'.

"Perhaps, Mister Potter." The nurse tried to smile after her scare. It was a bit shaky with adrenalin.

"Does the magical world do much in the way of transplants?"

"Of what?" 'Me leg! I can't feel me leg!' "Oh. Not many, really. We can reattach things if they're not too badly damaged and it's soon enough."

"But what about implantation of organs." 'Honestly, Mister Weasley, it hit your head. What could possibly be the matter with your limbs?'

"Not really. Well... there are extreme cases. Mad-Eye Moody comes to mind. The man had a magical device implanted in his eye socket." Hari perked up. 'The pain! I'm dying! Tell mum I love her!'

"Yeah? What about actual eyes?" 'Someone get a healer!' A piece of toast was being used to wipe up the jam.

"Aside from some rituals that can grow new ones in odd places, no. Though we can regrow someone's *own* eye and implant that." 'But Professor, I was just having a bit of fun.'

"So in theory, it would be possible to use someone else's eye?" 'Minerva, it was rather entertaining, don't you think you're being a bit hard on them?'

"I suppose? I replace enough eyes during the year." 'No, Albus, I do not. It was juvenile and pointless.' "But when I can regrow someone's own eye, why would I want to use someone else's?"

"But if someone asked you to, you could." 'You don't think Severus's issuance of detentions cleaning first-year cauldrons is sufficient?'

"I suppose I could." 'Could someone pass the marmalade?'

"Wonderful." 'No, Mister Weasley, they cannot. I do not wish to learn what you intend to do with it.'

X

X

Hari had taken up residence in the library. Despite being able to, in theory, read all the books at once, there were several things preventing it. The simplest was just that reading magical texts was not as simple as seeing the characters. There were added dimensions to the task.

Added on to that was the fact that there were some books he couldn't see into at the moment. And the books he could only read every tenth minute for six seconds. And the one that only opened at midnight. Just from that restriction, half the library at the least was closed to him without further effort.

The biggest obstacle to the task, though, was that there were few limits to the perceptive qualities of the Byakugan, but reading libraries simply surpassed its ability to perceive everything at once. While the words might flit by, there was no real comprehension, so much as a vague memory.

And so he was forced to actually go through book after book, trying to find ways to duplicate unique magical artifacts. He didn't actually expect to manage it soon, or even figure it out, but he wanted to get started on reading the books he would need when that became a possible avenue of advancement to his newly acquired goal of three eyes of awesome power.

Right now, he was working on reading a book that kept trying to scream at him. It was getting on his nerves. His first answer would be to stab the thing, but the librarian was impressively threatening with her lecture on what she would do to someone who damaged a book. He knew that even with magic, there was little chance she could do everything she'd promised, the sheer variety of options she had laid out had been impressive. He thought he should introduce her to Uncle Hidan on one of his polite days. They would have fun.

Since direct violence wasn't an option, he had been forced to steal a pillow from the dorms and was smothering the damn thing. It kept struggling, but he was keeping it buried as its struggles got weaker and weaker. He'd been taught that sometimes a target had to be removed without lots of obvious marks. He was currently sitting on the pillow on the book on the floor.

"Good morning, Madam Pince," he said politely to the terrifying old woman.

"I have my eye on you, Potter," she growled. "What are you up to?"

"Reading a book?" Hari gestured to the text on alchemy in his lap.
"Mister Flamel is a fascinating history lesson on his own."

"Hmph." She was apparently upset that she had not caught him doing something blatantly evil. Or even worthy of skinning his entire family and using the results for a whip with which to belabor him.

The book gave a shudder and fell limp under him. He decided to wait a little longer. In case it was faking.

x

x

Tracy Davis was greeted to the morning copy of the *Daily Prophet* accompanied by a school owl with a small package. The tag on it addressed to her. This was beyond odd. Christmas was something

like a week ago and now presents were showing up? Present, anyway.

With a shrug, she opened the wrapping paper, and then the box inside.

Tracy, said the note inside. I probably should have sent this a while ago, but I kept forgetting. I'm not used to this holiday. I hope you like it. I understand the magic is supposed to help do up your hair for you.

Under the note was a small hair comb. It was made of some whitish material she tentatively identified as ivory. The small emerald set in the handle was just the shade to set off her hair.

"You have an admirer?" asked her father over her shoulder. She flushed and whirled around.

"No!"

"Remarkably strong denial."

"How does he do this even from a distance?"

X

X

Millicent found a package sitting on the rough-hewn table in her kitchen. The address to her was surprising. Why would anyone send a package this far after Christmas? Granted, her family didn't celebrate Christmas at all (favoring Saturnalia), but presents were a tradition everyone enjoyed. Since they were stealing the presents from the holiday, her family usually handled them at that time.

The note inside shed only a bit of light. Millicent, I know I should have sent this sooner, but I'm not used to this Christmas thing, so I'm glad I just remembered at all. I don't know if you'll like this, but you sometimes look like you really want a pair.

Under the note were a set of brass knuckles.

"Aww," cooed her mother from behind her.

It always struck Millicent that it was incredibly unfair that her mother was fine-boned and lithe and she had to take after her father. The man was large and brutish and had Troll blood that apparently bred true.

"Such a sweet gift." That was the other thing about her family. Her father was a gentle man who wouldn't hurt a fly if it were trying to kill him. Her *mother* on the other hand... had married her father because he was the only male in history (her father included) not to provoke the woman into a violent rage. Before their marriage, she had been known for turning down gentlemen suitors whose only mistake was asking if she wanted to dance by kicking them so hard that their testicles popped out their mouths. "Is it from a boy?"

On the upside, Millicent mused, unlike most families, the response she had was totally acceptable. She punched her mother in the jaw with her new gift.

X

X

Daphne Greengrass had the unpleasant experience of learning that she had a gift from her little sister. She loved the girl, but she was two years younger than her and infuriatingly chipper. Where Daphne had inherited her mother's black hair and her father's dry outlook on life, her sister had gotten her father's golden-blonde hair and her mother's cheerful disposition.

"Daphne!" the worst part was she was being informed while in bed, trying to sleep. "You have a package!"

"A what?"

"Pack-age!"

Ten minutes later, her sister had the jinxes reversed and Daphne was downstairs in the kitchen, glaring at the blonde menace to her sleep. "What was so important that I couldn't wait until sometime around dinner to get up?"

"There's a package addressed to you," her father replied.

"And it would have still been there this evening."

"Yes, but if I have to pick between waking you up and my having to deal with your sister pestering me to open the gift, I'll choose you being awake if it were two in the morning."

"Fine. Give it here." She had to shove her sister away so she could open the thing.

Daphne said the note, I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you earlier in the year, but it seems to have worked out. I know you said you're safe from reprisals, but I found this and thought of you.

"I'm going to regret opening this, aren't I?" She looked down as her sister began to squeal. Yes. There was a heart-shaped locket on a gold chain. "Definitely regretting it." She opened the locket, sighing, and found a miniature foe-glass in it. "That might actually be useful," she muttered as she considered if her parents would mind terribly her holding Astoria's head under water for a while.

X

X

Pansy was sitting at the breakfast table when a school owl flew in the window and dropped a package on the large table between her and her parents. The elder diners glared at the owl as it flew away, angry that it had interrupted their orderly and proper routine.

"It's got to be Hari," said Pansy as she began to carefully undo the wrapping paper and then open the box. "No one else would send a gift so late without any warning."

Her parents had not been happy to find out that she was not the top of the Slytherin crowd, nor that she was spending time with Harry Potter. She had considered explaining to them the fact that Hari tended to warp reality around him like planets orbited the sun, but had decided that her rather conservative parents wouldn't understand. She used conservative in the sense that someone might say that the ocean was wet or that the sky was big.

Pansy, I should really have sent this sooner, but I didn't actually get a chance to get anything for people until after Christmas, so I guess this will have to do. Thanks for the tea, by the way. It's been a godssend. The House Elves are trying to find me some, but I fear they may have to raid the normal world for it. I hope this finds you in good health.

Under the note was a digital watch. Pansy's eye twitched. The papers with the watch said that it was accurate to a few seconds a decade. The best magical clock could not do nearly that. And this one promised a discrete alarm-something magic had yet to develop at all.

"What is *that*?" hissed her mother. "It looks like a *watch!* "

Pansy mused on the fact that her mother seemed aware of what it was. She decided given that, the question didn't need an answer. Instead, she checked and found the watch was already set to the correct time according to a second note. She noticed that the edge of the watch had a crude astrolabe built in as well. Enough it could be used with a finger to get a good guess of location.

She shrugged and put the band on her wrist.

X

X

"Blaise!" called his mother. She was dressed in a rather revealing bathing suit. He was used to it. He had been dozing in the sun on the veranda.

"Yes, mother?"

"You have a gift. I hope it's from a girl."

"I doubt it, mother," he replied. "I am only close to four girls at the moment, and they all sent me gifts."

"You're not working hard enough, then." His mother had a broad grin on her face as she gave a dramatic sniff of disapproval. Then her smile became more mischievous. "Maybe you have a secret admirer?"

"Anything is possible, mother." His tone was humoring.

Blaise, I was out... "shopping" and I thought of you when I came across this.

"He had better not be a secret admirer."

"Scandalous!" His mother was grinning again.

Blaise lifted from the long package a dagger. "Is this?"

"A well-made dueling dagger? Yes, I think it is." Her eyebrows waggled.

"Don't even say it mother."

X

X

"Hermione?"

"Yes, dad?"

"Could you come into the kitchen, please?"

Hermione sighed and put down the book she was reading. Her new... friends had come through. Even Pansy had sent something. It was nice to have people send things to her other than family-and to be able to send gifts outside the family. Pansy's gift had been several books on pureblood customs and history. Despite the slant of the writing, they were highly informative and explained a great deal of the attitude she had discovered.

"What's wrong?" She walked into the kitchen. "Oh." There was an owl sitting on the table, currently stealing her father's bacon. She took the package off its leg. "Shove off." The bird gave her a glare and took flight. "Sorry, that was a school owl and I think they're used to being fed at the end of the journey."

"I don't mind that," replied Dan Granger. "But that was my breakfast it fed on. Just be glad your mom was out of the house. She'd have had a right *fit* if she'd seen it on the table."

Hermione nodded absently as she opened the gift. She twitched and the plate on the table cracked in half, both pieces rising into the air so quickly they exploded against the ceiling.

"Okay..." Dan rose. "I know that look from your mother. I'm going to be in the garage, working on... uh... something." He scurried out of the room.

Hermione, read the note, I was thinking of you and what I could get you and then I realized that success is its own reward. I expect you to levitate a rock by the time you get back. Hari.

(A/N John)

This is one of those chapters that just kinda happened. Part of this was padding when I was just trying to make sure I wrote regularly. The rest... wasn't exactly planned either. Spoon is especially fond of Gred and George in the background.

To tell the truth, the only part of this that I even slightly expected was the Mirror scene. And even there, I had no idea what he was going to see until he did. So yeah... I have no excuse for this chapter.

(A/N John 2)

It is worth mentioning that Spoon comments whenever I fanboy over a particular reviewer or favorite-ing. If you're one of those who is responsible, congratulations. I will leave it to your imaginations which ones you are.

(A/N John 3)

If you're a fan of trivia, you might be interested in knowing that this may be the first chapter where I ever went back and actually rewrote anything I penned (typed). I had loved the note to Hermione and wanted to end on it. So I went back and moved it to the end of the chapter. It's not a huge change, but it was a first.

John Out

The Curious Incident

Chapter 10: The Curious Incident of the Dragon in the Night

"How were your vacations?" Daphne asked the others as they sat in the compartment, headed back towards Hogwarts.

"Relaxing," replied Tracy. "I managed to spend several weeks with almost nothing odd happening to me. It was a nice change. I had almost forgotten what it was like."

"Speak for yourself. I merely traded Hari for my mother," said Blaise. "It's just a different kind of weird. Besides, my mom was celebrating the end of her mourning period."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Her husband died right after their wedding. It was the day after the sorting. Natural causes." Blaise smiled wryly. "Fell up and down the stairs. Six times. Onto a pile of knives. From the guest house kitchen. And then buried in a shallow grave. Alive."

"That's *natural causes* ?"

"That's what the medical examiner ruled. He said, 'given that I'm being dangled by one ankle over an active volcano, it was most definitely natural causes.' Or something like that." Blaise shrugged. "Besides, falling up and down a flight of stairs onto knives and then being buried alive naturally causes you to die."

The rest of the cabin was looking at him in a mix of horror and fascination.

"Actually, what he said was, 'marrying you counts as suicide.' I don't get why." He flashed them a smile. "Anyway, she was happy to be able to wear bright colors again. I think she's started dating a nice rich man."

The others shared suspicious looks. "That's... good?" managed Pansy.

"Maybe. We'll see." Blaise said mildly. His eyes got cold for a moment. "Of course, if he's mean to her..." He brightened. "But why borrow trouble. How was your time off, Pansy?"

"Eh." Pansy sighed. "I spent it with my parents. The only upside was that Malfoy wasn't invited." She grinned. "It was so nice to not have him around. On the other hand, my parents were there."

"So?" Millicent cocked her head. "What's wrong with that?"

"You people!" Pansy snapped. "Because of you lot, I started realizing how silly my parents sound. They don't seem to think even half-bloods might be worthy of consideration, let alone anything else. Never mind that Granger is the smartest student in our year."

"I had some great brawls with my mother," said Millicent. "We wrecked the living room."

"With your *mother* ?" asked Tracy.

"Well yeah. My dad doesn't like fighting."

"Isn't your mom a foot shorter than you?"

"Yeah. Don't let it fool you, she's stronger than I am and more resilient."

"That's a thing."

The door slammed open and a frizz-haired ball of fury stormed in. "I am going to beat that jerk to a pulp!" she snarled as she dumped herself into the seat beside Blaise.

"Okay," he said placatingly. "Is there any chance you can elaborate?"

"Hari!" she hissed. "He sent me a package wrapped like a gift."

"What'd he get you?" asked Pansy.

"What?"

"He sent me a digital watch." Pansy held out her wrist, showing the device. "It keeps better time than magical ones. They're always based on the phase of the moon or something like that."

"He got you something?"

"Me too," added Tracy.

Hermione screamed. Blaise picked up a piece of parchment that fell from her hand. "Oh." He handed it to Daphne.

"Oh' indeed." She handed it around.

Pansy began to snicker.

X

X

Hari leaned forwards and Hermione overbalanced, her swing sending her flying forward and the book in her hand into the mashed potatoes. "Hello, Hermione," he greeted her. "Welcome back from vacation." He absently avoided her badly aimed kick. "Did you make progress?" He blocked the thrown piece of roast by using the bowl in his hand.

"Stop moving!"

"Okay." Hari stopped moving and her attempt to hit him caused her to miss and smack Draco Malfoy in the back of the head. He went face-first into the stuffing.

"Potter!" Snape's voice cut through the chatter of students reuniting with friends who they hadn't seen for as long as two whole weeks and were, therefore, in need of shouting to each other the details of

their vacations (the volume partly necessitated by the shouting being done by other groups of friends in competition for the available sonic wavelengths). "Twenty points from Slytherin for Granger hitting Malfoy."

Hermione stared at the book in her hand and then at the blond head otherwise lost in a mound of food. "Uh..."

"And a detention for Granger missing you."

Hermione flushed. "I'm getting detention?" she whispered.

"No," replied Blaise. "Hari is. I don't think Snape is really aware that there are students other than Hari when he's around."

"Don't worry, Hermione," said Hari. "I won't go to the detention, so you don't need to feel guilty."

"I wasn't feeling guilty." She glanced at Malfoy. "Except for not hitting you. I don't feel *guilty* about that, though, just frustrated."

"That's okay, then." Hari leaned back on the bench.

"Hari," began Millicent, "I want to thank you for the gift. They were so useful!"

Hermione's eye twitched.

Hari smacked his forehead. "That's right! Hermione, did you make progress like I told you to?"

Several forks launched themselves into the air. "No, I did not."

"You're still having the anger problem, are you?"

"Yes," she hissed.

X

X

"Where did you get that book?" asked Hermione as Hari sat across from her in the common room.

The book in question was quite... leathery—that was a good word for it—and had some dark stains on the brown cover. To make things worse, the whole thing smelled a bit chemical. "This?" Hari turned a page, not looking up. Or opening his eyes. "The library."

"I don't think I've seen it there."

"Have you been in the restricted section?"

"Of course not!"

"That's why, then."

"You... you..."

"I'll let you read it if you manage to levitate something without being mad at me." He turned another page, for the look of the thing more than because he actually needed to. "It's not so hard now that it stopped fighting me."

"I'll assume you don't have permission to read that book?"

"What's 'permission'?"

"Gah!"

"Focus on your task or I'll hit you with your wand again." The object in question was currently orbiting Hari in a neat elliptical.

Hermione glared at the pebble on the carpet.

"This isn't really all that advanced," commented Hari. "It's just some simple rituals. This one for growing extra arms is fascinating." He shifted the book in his hand, blocking the pebble. "Here's one that

makes teeth even. Wow, it's just a bit of mouse blood and a few words."

The pebble fell to the floor. Hermione glared at it and then took a deep breath. "You promise to let me read it?"

"Of course. Carrot and stick."

The pebble wobbled as it rose, but it *did* rise.

"Very good, Hermione. Now you need to get it even."

"You said I could read the book."

"Yes. I'll let you read the page of your choosing. You can read the whole thing when you get things steady."

"The ritual for even teeth."

"Alright..." Hari held out the book. "You do know there's a second p-"

"Shut it, Potter."

"But-"

"Seriously. Shut it."

"Fine. Now get back to work."

"Or what? Ow! ICK!" Hermione covered her head as her wand struck her on the cheek.

X

X

Hari was standing on one of his favorite nighttime perches. The Astronomy Tower gave a good angle for him-specifically, it gave a

clear line of fire for his stolen toy. He made sure to go up at least once a week and practice by shooting Acromantula in the forest.

It also allowed him to indulge in one of his other amusements: watching the progress of the dragon. Hari had noticed that the kindly idiot who worked as a groundskeeper had acquired a dragon earlier in the year and had been observing as it grew ever larger.

Somehow, everyone had missed the fact that it now took up most of the wooden hut that the man lived in. What was actually worrying was that no one spotted the six feet of anaconda-thick tail waving out the back door. Or the pile of broken cow bones by the front and the increasing supply of dung in the greenhouses.

Hari was coming to the conclusion that everyone was blind, since for the last week, there had been a pair of leathery wings that punched out the windows of the tiny building and flailed wildly. And the thing had been roaring and shooting fire out the door in twenty-foot bursts.

It was only a matter of time until... ah. The hut exploded into flames as the dragon bellowed and launched itself into the sky. It was about the size of a large summoned creature-not one of the boss-critters.

The gun at Hari's hip swiveled and fired with a crack and the twelve-point-seven millimeter round tore a grapefruit-sized hole out of the creature's left wing. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and grinned.

Just for the sake of trying, he fired Intelligent Hard Work at the dragon and gave it a boost with Pressure Damage. For a brief moment, there was a sun in the night sky over Hogwarts. When it had gone, Hari was unsurprised to find that there was an awful lot of dragon left. It was looking a bit ragged after the tearing effect of the wind attack, but it was still struggling to gain altitude.

Hari shrugged. Well, it wasn't like he'd expected it to die quickly. Instead, he fired a trio of False Darkness, blowing more holes in the dragon's wings, and then flicked a wind dragon to wind through the air and slam into the creature's flank.

It screamed as scales were ripped from its side. Then its hide began to tear away and a huge rent appeared as flesh was winnowed away by the slashing blades of the technique. Hari wished he'd figured out the lightning version of the dragon-attacks. It seemed like it would be really useful right now.

A Water Trumpet just knocked the stunned creature further off balance. An earth dragon launched itself up from the bank of the lake and spat mud-covered rocks that pummeled the beast. He gathered his chakra, deciding to end things after testing his techniques against something this magically resistant. It was pretty sure that he could put a metal spike through its head and kill it that way, but it might require more skill than he had now. Instead, he unleashed False Darkness again. The giant bolt vaporized the dragon's head and the decapitated corpse tumbled downwards, crashing into the burning remains of the groundskeeper's hut.

Hari yawned and decided to turn in.

X

X

"Potter," Professor Snape's voice on the other side of Hari's door sounded more exasperated than angry.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Get up."

Hari yawned and rolled off of the ceiling. He was impressed: he'd actually gotten to sleep before Snape started heading down the corridor and triggered him waking himself. As he opened the door, he put on a smile. "What can I do for you, Professor?"

"I'm nearly certain you are somehow involved in this latest incident, Potter. I have no evidence, of course." He grinned evilly. "However,

as you are the cause of my being awake at two-thirty, you get to join me."

"Come again, Professor?"

"If I have to be awake, you have to be awake." Snape motioned for Hari to follow him as he began to walk towards the Common Room. "It's sad, really," he commented. "I had so enjoyed the two weeks without any incident that smacked of your touch. I knew it was too good to last, though."

"Sorry, Professor?"

"Yes, yes, I'll assume you denied it and move on. Any chance you'd care to guess what happens to have me awake at this hour?"

"No, Professor. Did another student run off to join the love-thing?"

Snape twitched. "No, Potter. It's remarkable, really. No students have gone missing. For once."

"Then I've got nothing."

"Of course you don't." Snape led the way to the entrance hall in silence.

"It's fascinating," Dumbledore was saying to McGonagall when they got there. "Apparently, Hagrid was keeping a dragon in his hut."

"Gosh, Professor Headmaster, was he?" asked Hari.

"So I gather. Everyone seems to have missed it, too." Dumbledore smiled slightly. "I've asked the staff and everyone says that they've seen nothing odd about the hut for weeks."

"Which," Snape added, "should really be a warning sign. Hagrid is always breeding something."

"From what I gather, the dragon was probably taking up most of the room in the hut. Which is why it has come as a bit of a puzzle that no one saw anything." Dumbledore twinkled as the staff, who were all studiously engaged in synchronized floor inspection.

"Since I'm coming into this a bit late," said Hari, "I follow that a dragon was being kept in someone's house. Fair enough. What I'm not understanding is what I'm doing awake."

"An excellent question," said Professor Sprout.

"I've come to my new rule," replied Snape. "If something has happened that requires me to be awake in the middle of the night, Potter can be awake too. I can't prove it's his fault, but I'm sure every time I've not had a night's sleep because of an incident of some sort or another, it's been because of him. So the least I can do is make him stay awake."

"It would appear that the dragon got free," answered Dumbledore. "And was trying to fly away from the burning home when it was set upon and killed. There are, therefore, the dual concerns that there was a dragon on the grounds without being noticed," the staff began to check the vaulted ceiling for mold, "and that something killed a dragon on school grounds... without being noticed.

"Therefore, there will be a search. Get the Prefects to help you. I want the school to be checked as best it can before morning. Don't engage if something threatens you, just call for Fawkes." He looked at Hari and winked. "I'm sure Mister Potter will offer his help as well. Since he's up." There was a slight edge in his tone that Hari last heard from his father.

"I guess I can, Professor Headmaster."

"Good. I, meanwhile, will head back to sleep." He smiled benevolently. "I have a lot of paperwork to get through in the morning. Dragons on the grounds alone will require a few days of

time to sort out. And that doesn't include getting the permits after the fact."

X

X

The Great Hall was abuzz. Three houses were trying to find out what had happened to cause all that noise the night before. The only ones who had any idea were the Gryffindors who had been able to watch from their tower. Some of them. The redhead moron was holding forth that the battle between Giants and Dementors had kept them awake well into the night.

"It took forever to get back to sleep," muttered Pansy. "Whatever it was, we heard it in the dungeon. Good grief, it was loud."

Blaise slipped into the seat opposite Hermione. "There was a dragon flying over the lake."

"How do you know that?" asked Tracy.

"I asked." Blaise smiled. "A couple of second-year girls were willing to overlook my Slytherin-ness and tell me."

"How does that make all the noise?"

"Ah. From what I gather, something tore it to shreds and then killed it."

Hermione was turning a bit green. As were most of the others.

Hari finished his meal and shrugged. "That's about right."

"How do you know?" hissed Hermione.

"Professor Snape woke me up to help with the search." Hari set his bowl down and stretched.

"Why aren't you dressed properly?"

"I don't know how that's connected to what we were talking about, but I prefer this." Hari gestured to the outfit he'd taken to wearing over the break. "It's a little less... civilian."

"Potter." Snape's voice caused several of the older years to jump. "How fortunate that I came upon you as you were discussing your dress."

"I'm not wearing a dress, Professor."

"I'm not even going to entertain that one. You are, in fact, required by school rules to wear robes. It's part of the dress code."

"Oh."

"Indeed, Potter."

"Professor Headmaster!" called Hari. "I'm going to take a field trip this afternoon."

Dumbledore nodded and returned to his toast.

"I won't be in Transfiguration this morning, either," Hari informed his friends. "I'm going to get a bit of sleep."

X

X

"What are you wearing?" hissed Hermione at dinner.

Hari looked up. "Robes?"

"Those are *not* school robes."

Hari made a show of examining the garment. It was black, like school robes, but it had a somewhat more tubular shape, opening at

the front. And there were all the red clouds on it. "You're sure?"

"Yes!"

"Loathe as I am to agree with Granger," muttered Pansy, "but she's right."

"Funnily enough..." Hari held up a finger. "I shall hold off on answering your questions so I can do so only once. Hello, Professors." Behind him, Snape and McGonagall were eying him with suspicion as distaste. "As I was about to explain to Hermione, these are technically school robes."

"An interesting position to take, Potter," Snape growled. "Considering that they are not, in fact, school robes."

"About that..." Hari smiled at Daphne and Tracy, across the table from him. "These are school robes. They have just been suitably tailored to my specifications. Oh, I think Professor Headmaster has some sort of announcement to make, we can continue this later."

There was a bang as Dumbledore stood up and fired his wand into the air. "Your attention please. Thank you. Miss Varence, I'm sure that whatever it is you are discussing with Miss Taber is quite interesting, but I happen to be speaking and, as Headmaster, I get to have everyone listen when I do. It's a special little perk of the job, so if you'll cease your yammering, I will take it as a kindness.

"Good. I would like to deal with the rumors that have cropped up regarding this morning's incident. I have no doubt that, in the best Hogwarts tradition, anything resembling fact has been carefully filtered out so as to avoid informing the unwary. I will have to unfortunately break that happy state of affairs, if only to get you think about your homework once in a while.

"At some time this morning, around two, a dragon which has been living in Rubeus Hagrid's hut decided that it was ready to leave the

nest, if you will. It did so by tearing its way free of said 'nest'-Hagrid's home-and flying up into the air, leaving behind a burning ruin.

"A person or persons unknown at this point proceeded to bombard the dragon with high-level magic, ultimately destroying the creature by annihilating its head. I subsequently convened the staff and had a 'thorough' search of Hogwarts performed-not counting the various out-buildings, secret chambers, staff quarters, and so on-and can happily say that there was no unknown person that we know of in the castle to perpetrate the worrying damage to a magically resistant species. We have thusly concluded that it didn't really happen and so there is no need to be even a little bit worried about dangerous magical creatures being easily annihilated on school property without the perpetrator being discovered.

"Hagrid is currently in the process of rebuilding his house to be fireproofed, and any seventh years with skill in Runes would be welcome if they would offer their aid. I'm sure that you all have nothing to fear today that did not already terrify you yesterday.

"One last note: a new school policy. Going forwards from this point on, school robes may not be modified from their current states. I hope that clears up any issues. Now please go to bed, you can stand missing a meal or two."

"I guess we should go then," said Hari. "Shame we couldn't finish," he said to the Professors.

(A/N John)

So, a bit of padding here. But mostly it was just that I needed to deal with Norbert. It wasn't something Hari was likely to miss, so... yeah. I have to admit I really liked Snape's new policy. I totally would have done the same.

(A/N John 2)

About the death of Norbert. I don't want to get complaints from anyone who thought that Hari killing random students who'd done nothing to him was funny. That is all.

(A/N John 3)

Pairings. Really. He's *eleven!* I have nothing planned whatsoever, though if I had to guess, Luna and Hermione are somewhere on the far side of not happening. Just a guess. Spoon is pushing for Sakura, for what that's worth. Here's a hint: not much.

The Corridor

Chapter 11: The Corridor That Isn't Really Worrying in the Least

"I. Will. Kill. You!" Hermione threw a copy of *Hogwarts, A History* at Hari's head. To her dismay (although not surprise) it was dodged and nearly hit Blaise. It skidded on the floor and tripped a Hufflepuff who was too tired to see it in time. She pitched forwards and knocked a companion into a Ravenclaw, spilling several students into the scrambled eggs.

Hari cocked his head, not looking around. "Hm? Why?"

"Look what you did to me!" she snarled.

"I haven't done anything to you recently. You haven't made any further progress in your studies, I admit, but that's not—" Hermione bared her teeth at him. "Hey, cool! You look like Uncle Kisame!"

"You gave me a ritual that did this!"

"And?"

"And I look like a freak!"

"You look like my uncle! Although he's a bit of a freak. As I recall, you asked for the ritual, didn't you?"

"I know it didn't say anything about teeth like this!"

"It certainly did."

"Perfect recall, Hari. I know it didn't."

"Of course it did. On the second page."

"Second..."

"I tried to warn you, didn't I? But you didn't want to hear it."

Hermione gritted her teeth. They were bright white and all pointed. Each curved slightly inward and had what could best be described as blades on the inner edges. They were also perfectly even.

"I feel certain I will regret this," said Snape as he walked over. "But since you decided to have this discussion at a volume the whole hall could hear, I thought it prudent to find out what you were talking about." He glanced at Hermione. "Self-improvement rituals are generally discouraged before sixth year, when-Merlin's staff with the knob on the end, what did you do?"

"This is just a guess," said Hari. "But I'm thinking it was a ritual to make teeth even or something."

"I won't bother sending you to Hospital," Snape told Hermione. "We won't fiddle with ritual magic for a few months at the least. Then we can see if it's settled enough to meddle." He ignored Hermione's tearing eyes. "You can try looking around to see if there are any rituals that can undo this."

Hermione sniffled and punched Hari's shoulder. "Ow!" she shook out her hand. It was like hitting aged oak.

"Hm?"

"Shut up."

"See you tonight then."

"If you think I'm continuing lessons with you after this..."

"I would be completely right. I don't recall asking you." Hari patted her on the cheek. "Don't bite your tongue off and bleed to death, okay?" He rose and walked out of the Great Hall as Pansy began to snicker, only to be smacked by Millicent.

"Ow!"

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Despite Hermione's resolve not to continue studying with Hari, he was as good as his word. For the next three months, she would go to bed and find herself dragged from her sleep and bludgeoned about the head with her wand while she worked on levitating a pebble because Hari wouldn't let her rest until she made progress.

The worst part was that she was making progress. She had begun to move the pebble around now, something that should have been impossible for someone without an OWL to do-and that was using a wand. It was infuriating to find that Hari was right about ignoring codified rules for the most part. It was invalidating about two-thirds of the books she'd read on magic.

On the other hand, she was beginning to understand the more complex texts on the subject despite her total lack of formal grounding beyond reading. She didn't know the specialized terms, but the elaborate explanation of how magic worked on a more esoteric level was unfolding for her, even if only parts of it made sense.

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Hari patted Hermione as she dozed off and strolled out of her bedroom. She had made progress despite herself. He was feeling confident that he would manage to get her started on how to properly use magic by the end of the year. Or maybe next.

Regardless, he had been meaning to do a bit of investigating into the Corridor of Not at All Scary and had kept getting distracted by the interesting passageways and so on. But he had finally decided to just deal with it.

The dog had apparently gotten wind of his interactions with the dragon, judging from how it tried to back through the wall when he stepped into the corridor. He opened the trapdoor and walked down one side of the shaft and along the ceiling of the passage down below.

There was some sort of plant growing at the bottom of the shaft. Since it looked like something he'd seen in Aunt Konan's art collection, he decided to avoid it by using the walls again.

Keys. It was odd, really. He looked at the giant door and frowned. If you wanted to keep someone out, you locked the door and then kept the key near you, or gave it to some trusted guard. Or maybe hired a bunch of ninja to hide it somewhere. Regardless, the one thing you didn't do was leave it anywhere near the lock. That would defeat the purpose of having a lock. The worst part was that he could see which key matched the door.

Actually no, that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that there were no traps on the keys or the door. That was inexcusable as far as he was concerned. As a ninja, his specialty was extracting things from places like this, but that still meant he had to know how to protect them first. The only reason he could think of to have the keys here was to trap either them or the door. And even then, he wouldn't have a key that could open the door. For that matter, he hadn't discovered the way yet, but he expected that magic could be used to lock doors without any sort of physical key.

He shrugged. Someone was up to something. He didn't just rely on his eyes, despite the temptation. He tossed a kunai at the door and watched the effects. Most traps left traces if someone knew what to look for. The blunt end of the weapon struck the door. Nothing happened. He picked it up and tied a length of wire to the ring before flinging it up. The wire wrapped around the key that matched the door and he dragged it down as it struggled.

He prodded it with the tanto from his shoulder. Nothing. He opened the door. There was a chess set on the other side. He didn't think it

would let him pass. So he walked up the wall and along the ceiling. The stone figures began to toss their weapons up at him without any luck. Hari whistled to himself as he strolled to the far side and through the door there.

"So that's where Professor Stutterfaces put the other Troll." He debated killing it, but didn't see the point. It was tempting, just to be sure, but he decided against it. Besides, the thing was too stupid to look up and see him, so it probably wasn't worth worrying about.

The path to the next room, though... it gleamed to his eyes. The whole area was trapped to high heaven. And he hadn't the least idea what most of those effects did. Unlike secret passages, most runework didn't have instructions written into them.

Hari formed a pair of Shadow Clones and sent them ahead. The first one stepped into the hallway and paused. "So far, so good, Boss." It continued into the room at the far end. "There are flames, Boss."

"Thank you, Number One, I can see them." Hari frowned. "Is this what Professor Snape has to deal with? Nah."

"I don't know if there's an off-button in here, Boss. Everything looks like it's trapped, too."

Hari sighed.

"There's a room on the far end of this one, Boss. I can't see into it, though."

So his choices were to go back or poke around with his clones and find out what the traps did. He'd have to hope that none of them hit outside the trapped hallway of doom. He could try going outside the maze, but even then, there was no guarantee that he could get through that second wall of fire. Oh, and someone probably had the traps set to alert him or her to their triggering and would come to find out what was happening.

He could use the cloak to hide from detection, but that would only get him to the neutral point of "not caught". Unless he was really lucky and the person who set this up was incredibly stupid and decided to go check the other side of the traps while he followed...

Yeah. That wasn't happening. Let some other idiot find out what they'd put at the end of the trap-nest. That also explained why it was so easy to get around the other 'traps'; someone wanted people to reach this one. Of course, whoever designed this thing could have saved a lot of effort by having it at the beginning. Hari wasn't sure the point of lulling someone into the trap when they would walk into it anyway. Just put it at the bottom of the shaft and the person would be trapped anyway.

It wasn't his problem, so he headed back the way he came. The Troll was no more intelligent than it had been the other direction, and was ignored likewise. The poor chess set was still sorting out whose weapons were whose and were distracted. Hari was tempted to drop down and offer his assistance, but decided it might not be welcomed, given that there were stone fists being shaken at him. Instead, he gave them a cheeky wave and used the key in his pocket to lock the door behind him. He let it free and it fluttered away to join its companions-if it had been able to make sounds, he felt certain it would have made a happy chirp.

He ignored the giant dog that was now sitting in a puddle of its own urine and left the corridor. It had been a tremendous disappointment. It hadn't been scary to start with, and then it turned out to be a letdown until the end. He wished he'd been able to see what was being kept in there, but there were levels of danger that he'd been taught to avoid and anything where he would definitely get hit with unknown traps was pretty high on the list.

Maybe something interesting would happen if he came back tomorrow night?

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"Hello, Professor," said Hari. Professor Stutterfaces gave a little shriek as he jumped a foot into the air. "What are you doing here at the Corridor of Not Dangerous One Bit?"

Professor Stutterfaces whirled, clutching his chest with one hand and wheezing a little. He found Hari leaning against the wall, one leg over the other, hands in his pockets. Those stupid robes of his fell around him. There was the disconcerting aspect that he couldn't see the boy's eyes. His hair fell around his face like a shroud.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" he snarled. Sort of. It was a lot less snarl-y and much more gasping than he'd intended, but he added a pained glare to try and bring the fearsome-level up a bit.

"Leaning against the wall?"

Stutterface's eye twitched. " *Why* are you here, then."

"I'm taking a stroll, Professor."

The man's eyes narrowed. "At two in the morning?"

"Best time for it, Professor. No one bothers me."

"And you don't think you could show me the same courtesy?"

"I was wondering if you were planning to see what's at the end of the maze, that's all."

"What?"

"That's what's beyond the giant puppy," Hari replied. "No idea what's at the end, though." That was interesting. Professor Stutterface's body loosened slightly when Hari said that. His eyes showed him the muscles relaxing.

"How would you know?"

"Well, I poked my head down there, just to see, you know. But I didn't get to the end."

Hari turned and began to walk down the hall. "By the way, Professor, I'm glad to see you're feeling better."

"Thank you, Potter."

"Did the Unicorns help?"

There was a sort of sound not unlike "GRK" from behind him. He saw the man's eyes bulge wide and he clutched at his chest as his heartrate sped up.

"And your recovery helped your stutter, too." Hari began to tap a random bit of wall. "I hope your other face is doing well." He stepped into the secret passage, leaving behind a further shriek as the Professor opened his mouth. Then Hari lost sight of him in the passage's magic. That had been an exceptionally odd encounter-and he lived with his Uncles.

Oh well. The Professor was probably going to be fine, what with one thing and another. It wasn't like the traps were that dangerous in the maze. Well, excepting the end of it, and anyone who stepped in there was stupid and deserved whatever happened to him. Or her, he had to admit-Aunt Konan was just as dangerous as his Uncles, but still...

He spent an hour in the library, looking for a book on English grammar to see if there were a better way to phrase that thought.

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The next day, he skipped his classes to go through the library again, this time trying to find a translation charm; he had been meaning to read those books Hermione had gotten him for... well, since he'd

seen them-there wasn't much literature on the matter and he got the impression that most Wizards cared little for languages other than their own. The rare exceptions were intellectuals who'd simply learned the languages they had wanted to understand.

More frustratingly, no one seemed interested in anything resembling contemporary languages. For some reason, they were all obsessed with Greek, Latin, and Egyptian. Come to think of it, why was nothing east of the Urals represented either? He would have expected plenty from India at the least. Judging from the history of this world, the land he was visiting had once held dominion over India for a time. Surely *someone* visited the place? Granted, he knew absolutely nothing about Indian writing, but since he knew what the books in the library *did* contain...

Of course, given the nature of the library of Hogwarts, it was always possible he hadn't found the ones he was looking for. There were a couple of areas in the huge room that were hidden by walls. He noticed that pretty much everyone seemed unaware that the walls weren't normal ones. He could tell they had some sorts of conditions to bypass them, but he couldn't read them in the magical glow.

What was worse was that the students who *could* enter the areas didn't seem to be aware of it. He'd considered asking what was in there, but there was a real chance that they couldn't answer. And given the security around those areas, he didn't want to find out the hard way by triggering some sort of failsafe. Magic was fun, but it left so many dangers...

Strangely, Hermione was no help in his search. She hadn't come across anything about translation charms. She had expected he knew at least *one* of the languages the books she'd sent him were in. She'd taken a good bit of time to find them. She said she'd had to venture into Identic Alley to find a curio shop with books in those languages-no, she had no idea what was in them, but had decided to follow narrative convention (her phrasing) since "that seems to be how the Wizarding world works" and therefore went to a small store operated by a man of unclear-but-definitely-eastern origins and

purchased any books he had in languages from what was classically the Far East.

For all he knew, she'd bought him a pile of cookbooks. It didn't seem likely. The things radiated magic. He supposed there must be magical cookbooks, but the ones he'd seen in that Diagon place hadn't had anything resembling this sort of strength of aura. And while he didn't understand her short rant about story-logic or whatever it had been, he was clear that she was certain that the books were more than just random objects in a thrift shop.

When he had time, he would need to take another field trip to get some books on languages.

(A/N John)

Yeah, so Kisame-teeth. I had come up with the idea of the ritual and liked the idea that there was a catch. Then I suggested teeth like the Seven Swordsmen and Spoon loved it. So what the hey, you know? Odds are good that it will be commented on from time to time. I don't expect that it'll get fixed.

(A/N 2 John)

If you people think Hari is going to walk into that trap, you are sorely mistaken.

(A/N 3 John)

I had not intended my last author's note to be a request for pairing suggestions. Yuri is unlikely, sorry to disappoint you guys.

As much as I do not want to get involved in a discussion, it needs saying: there is a vast difference between talking about sex because you like grossing people out and having any interest in the activity itself. And even if we posit that a a person

is actually emotionally mature enough to kill (as opposed to just being psychologically damaged) that does not imply either an interest in sex, nor a physiological ability to perform. Mental maturation does not in any way prove that the person in question wants to have sex and, if then, that he is able to do so as opposed to being frustrated a lot.

To put it another way: "old enough to kill, old enough to fuck" just doesn't work. It's not a valid argument. The only people who use it are those inducting child soldiers into their armies and trying to break their minds to make them malleable.

(A/N 4 John)

A few people pointed out the whole Clone option. I honestly had forgotten about that. It's been fixed. So thank you to Pikamew1288 and pax-draconix.

John Out

Working On Bad Habits Exams Begin!

Chapter 12: Working On Bad Habits. Exams Begin!

All too soon (according to Hermione-everyone else seemed to think it was the opposite) exams were rolling around. Most of Hari's friends were set to do at least moderately well, in no small part to Hermione's growing ability to actually explain instead of rant. The girl in question, of course, was certain she was doomed. Despite what everyone other than Hari told her, she was utterly convinced that she had missed some key thing she needed to study. Hari merely said that she had eidetic memory and should focus on her magic instead of things she already had in her head.

That was her other problem. She was finding wandless magic slow going. It was her own desire to prove herself and the blinders she had on measuring against Hari that meant that she was utterly deaf to her peers' and teachers' continual exclamations of amazement as she was beginning to show mastery of the initial spells learned in their first year. Hari, on the other hand, was regularly walking out of class early since he'd finished the coursework for the day. Otherwise, he wrote his essays instead of paying attention much of the time.

She was still annoyed that he essentially treated the rules not merely as suggestions but as things that explicitly applied only to other people. The fact that the teachers had pretty much decided to go along with his interpretation somehow failed to assuage her. Instead of assuming they were right, it was making her a little crazy. Hari decided to help.

Every time he found her studying, he dragged her along to explore somewhere. Usually it was a place that was probably off limits to students-or, at the very least, first years. Often, when he left a class, he took her with him, despite the fact that she was trying to pay attention to the lesson. For some reason, the teachers were either unaware of this happening (despite her rather audible complaints) or

had just decided to permit it. Hari was hoping he was slowly breaking her of her belief in the rules as unassailable.

Which brought them to the week leading up to exams.

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"Where are we going?" growled Hermione. She had been having a peaceful (relatively) dinner in the Great Hall when Hari had suddenly stood up, taken hold of her wrist, and proceeded to the exit. She'd been forced to run to keep up and had lost her meal down Malfoy's back as her plate had been in her hand when she was yanked from her seat. She had no *real* objection to that part, at least-despite her desire to obey the rules, Draco Malfoy was a poisonous little ferret (for some reason, she never thought of him as a weasel) who never failed to remind her of her "inferior" origins. Even Pansy had pretty much given up that since Hermione had been regularly demonstrating wandless magic with a command unseen outside of Hari Potter.

"No idea."

"Then stop! Oof!" The last part came as he complied instantly and she rammed into his back. It was rather like slamming into an old oak tree. He didn't even move as almost a hundred pounds of accelerating twelve-year-old impacted him.

"Hey, I know!" He started running again. Her cry as he headed at a solid wall ended in a strangulated shriek as he went straight through the illusion and down the staircase behind it.

"How did you know about this?"

"You mean you don't?" It still regularly amazed Hari that so many people didn't know about these shortcuts. They played havoc with his eyes, mind; seeing a passage that went downward but ended

three floors above its start gave him headaches on a regular basis and he was still trying to adjust his mental map to envision those twists of space-time. But the fact that everyone else was apparently ignorant of these useful paths boggled his mind.

He ignored her scream of primal terror as he walked off a landing without a railing onto thin air and trotted along a solid-stone corridor that was suddenly visible. People were so jumpy. It could frustrate an impatient individual. He'd found it best to simply ignore such problems.

"Here we are."

"Where is 'here'?" she asked warily. She expected that it would be one of those random sections of the castle that no one had been to for a century and was probably unsafe.

"The third floor."

"WHAT?"

"Is your hearing going?" he asked, voice concerned. "Should I take you to the medic for help with that?"

"No!"

"Oh good. Then I needn't repeat myself. Hello, Professor!" The last part was to Professor Stutterfaces, who had just walked out the door. His screech was remarkably similar to Hermione's.

"Professor..." began Hermione. "I can explain..."

"I kidnapped her," said Hari. "She needs to try a bit of rule-breaking."

Professor Stutterfaces just made sharp 'eep' sounds as he held his chest, glaring at the two of them.

"I decided I would show her the Not-Even-A-Bit-Worrisome-Corridor because that might show why she doesn't need to be so concerned

with rules."

The glare intensified somehow and Stutterfaces had turned slightly purple with pale around the edges.

"I'm, glad to see you're doing a little better, Professor," said Hari. "I gather that visiting the medic was helpful?"

"What are you talking about, Potter?" Stutterfaces hissed.

"I know you visited her a week or so ago. No, longer. It was the day after I met up with you out here. What did you need something to help with heart failure for anyway?"

"What." Hermione was utterly confused by this conversation.

"Professor Stutterfaces needed some potions from the medic labeled for their ability to help with heart problems." He looked at the purple Professor. "Are you well, sir?" When he only got a strange, throat-sound, he nodded. "Glad to hear it." He pushed passed the stunned man and pulled Hermione through the door.

"Ow!" he covered his ears, one with his hand and one with hers.
"Would you please stop screaming?"

Sound continued.

"What are you so upset about, anyway?"

More continual sound.

"Are you scared?"

Sound.

"What of? The puppy over there?" Hari shook his head.

The sound was getting quieter.

"Are you breathing, at least?"

Still quieter.

"Okay, the sound is getting annoying." His finger stabbed a cluster of nerves on her neck that cut the scream suddenly. "Much better." It struck him that he could probably have used magic to achieve the same goal, but he was pretty sure of his skill. There were fewer ways to stop his method of silence-creation, even if a misapplication of the technique could render a victim permanently mute. Or an intentional application, in some cases. "You know," he mused, "you still don't seem to be breathing."

The scream was now silent, but apparently ongoing.

"Yep." His finger jabbed several spots on her chest and abdomen. Chakra fired her nerve endings and her diaphragm dropped, forcing a tortuous breath into her lungs for the first time in nearly a minute. "You going to manage from here out?" He paused. "Guess not." A series of different nerves caused the muscle to contract and she exhaled. "Still no good? Oh well."

It took almost a minute of him manually operating her lungs before she took a shuddering breath of her own. Her mouth moved for quite a few seconds before he blinked. "I should probably fix that." His finger prodded the cluster he'd hit first and her voice suddenly cut in.

"-horrible person! You deserve to-oh. What did you do? "

"Made sure you didn't pass out and die?"

"Specifics, please."

"Operated your diaphragm for you. You seemed to be having trouble with it. Why was that, anyway?" She pointed behind him and her eyes went wider than they had been. "If you start screaming again, I'm going to have to make you quiet again. No? Good."

He walked over to the cowering Cerberus, her feet making scratching noises as Hari dragged her along the stone floor. "He's not dangerous. He's a puppy who wishes he were with his mum, aren't you..." he broke off, "boy?" The giant dog whimpered pitifully and tried to back through the wall it was pressed up against. "See? He's not mean." He tried to use her hand to pet the dog, but despite the confined space, it put up a remarkable display of dodging to avoid possibly coming into contact with him. "Oh well." He frowned. "I guess I could show you the stuff down below, but that was much less interesting." He shrugged and began to leave, finding that she was still not helping move and simply pulling her with him.

When the door shut behind them, she smacked him. Well, she tried to. Her hand swept through the space that his head had occupied shortly before. "You jerk!"

"What?" He avoided the followup strike with ease as well.

"That was a Cerberus! They're *dangerous!* "

"Nah." Hari waved his free hand dismissively. "That was a pup at best. It'd barely reach the knee of Uncle Pein's familiar. Hardly a threat."

"What?"

"Are you going to do that thing where you just keep asking for explanations?"

"Am I what?"

"Ah. I guess you are. You probably want to get to the last Transfiguration class of the year, right?"

"What?"

"I'm going to assume that's a 'no' then." Hari smiled and headed into another passageway that had been masquerading as a window onto

the grounds. "Good. I'll show you this place in the Astronomy Tower that has a view through the giant telescope and no one seems to know about it." And he trotted off, ignoring the stream of "what's emitted by his companion at irregular intervals.

X

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The exams came in their due time, to the relief of Hermione, who had supplanted her fear of failure with a fear of being dragged off yet again. She had decided that no matter how unprepared she was, it could not be worse than *another* expedition into some untraveled part of the castle where she would be dangled over some horrible walkway while alligators (where had they gotten alligators for *Scotland's* climate?) tried to nibble at her toes, her shoes long ago dropped into some swampy pit. Really, she was convinced more than ever that adventure was best experienced on this side of a nice, normal page covered in ink.

Their first exam was for Transfiguration. Hermione fretted the entire time during the written portion, despite citing sources perfectly. The rest of the little clique had been studying with the increasingly harassed Hermione, and had therefore memorized a good bit of the material for the test.

McGonagall didn't even comment when Hari handed in an exam five minutes after the start, ink already dry. Teachers did a reasonable job of locking their doors and windows against magical intrusion, but ninja were supposed to enter places that were explicitly forbidden (if one didn't enter the Emperor's private chambers, how was one to kill him in his sleep, after all?) and so he had decided that he would find out what the exams were beforehand. It was only sporting, since they hadn't kept him out. Of course, he didn't want to spoil Hermione's fun lecturing the others, so he let her continue instead of sharing.

In addition to his completed essay (and perfect multiple choice and short answer sections as well), he proceeded to turn the tortoise into an excessively elaborate teakettle and then into a turtle with the explanation, "back and forth is too easy". Since the turtle had a shell with ornate detailing not found on the kettle, McGonagall had a sort of misty look on her face and completely missed that Hari had then trotted out of the room, giving Hermione a jaunty wave.

History of Magic was even less noteworthy. Hari had learned by judicious application of intelligence gathering (spying) that Binns always gave the same exams. Moreover, he found out that Binns always assigned the same grades to the same seats in the class. Apparently, he was in a bit of a rut. So Hari decided he wouldn't trouble the disturbed ghost and just didn't show up.

Over dinner, they were treated to a running commentary by Hermione, who bemoaned the fact that her teapot had been tortoiseshell-patterned despite several attempts by Blaise to point out that the pattern in question had been different than her original tortoise.

"Just stop trying, Blaise," grumbled Pansy. "She'll just find something else to worry about."

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Astronomy was intensely frustrating for the entire rest of his year-group. For some reason, Hari seemed to have incredibly good eyesight, since he would peer through the same telescope they did and then pronounce the answer with a degree of precision that the Professor herself was unable to match through their equipment. He had decided not to bother people by telling them that his Byakugan could see the eyepiece of the NEWT telescope in a different area of the tower and so he was using the massively more powerful device for his work. It was probably for the best, he decided.

That didn't stop the Professor from gushing constantly about his prodigious skill in the utterly useless field of staring at balls of rapidly decaying hydrogen. Especially hydrogen that had long since already been transformed into other elements. He couldn't see the use. A few potions apparently cared about the observable light from a long-dead star, so he supposed there might be an application, but it struck him as silly. Instead he concerned himself with the moon and planets, which would at least be there when they were seen and would also conceivably, therefore, have an effect on something—even if no one seemed able to explain *why* a planet's position in its orbit relative to that of the Earth would make a difference.

X

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Hari decided to save his Professor a good deal of headache two days later, when their exams resumed. Specifically, he failed categorically to even show up for Potions. From what he was informed by his classmates, Professor Snape was torn between being utterly livid and gleeful that he would be able to give Hari a T. Hari was still having some trouble with the grading system, since it seemed to be entirely based on arbitrary titles instead of any sort of actual order.

Hermione reported at dinner that Draco Malfoy had attempted to sabotage her potion. Actually, she reported that he had been planning on it. Since Pansy had heard about it through the grapevine, she had told Daphne and Blaise. Blaise, in turn, decided not to trouble Professor Snape about the matter. He did, however, inform Hari.

Hari had, therefore, spent the early morning hours going through Draco Malfoy's possessions and coating his clothing with some compounds that would react poorly to the fumes produced during the early stages of the brewing process in the potion the exam was to be on (something that he probably wasn't supposed to know, but what

else was expected of him when Snape locked the exam notes in a drawer in a safe in his private quarters under an illusion?).

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Hari was suitably shocked (read: grinning knowingly) when he learned that Draco Malfoy's potion had detonated catastrophically during the first few minutes of the exam. Apparently, someone had modified his cauldron to focus the spray only upwards, limiting the damage that Malfoy's failures usually caused. Instead, Malfoy alone was rushed to Hospital, the flesh on his front scorched and blackened. To the luck of the castle, his lungs had been too badly damaged by the heat to scream loudly and he was now under a silencing charm while the medic worked on healing him.

"Gosh," said Hari, one hand at his mouth. "How ever could he have introduced Pixie Blubber to the potion?" Not even bothering to wait to find out what potion they were supposed to have been making to exclaim in surprise.

Snape stalked over about that moment. "Potter..." he paused. "I will see you expelled for this." His tone wasn't particularly vehement. "And detention for the rest of the year."

"For what, Professor?"

"Trying to kill Malfoy. Again."

"But I wasn't even there, Professor."

"I'm not sure why I should take that into account. It's not like you're going to show up anyway."

"True, true."

"Did you have anything to do with it?" hissed Hermione after Snape left.

"No."

"Oh good." She paused. "Are you lying to me again?"

"No."

She frowned. "And if I asked if that were a lie?"

"I would lie."

"Um..." Hermione was trying to ignore how the rest of the group was snickering. Except Blaise. He was laughing so hard he'd fallen off the bench and rolled under the table.

"Glad you agree," replied Hari cheerfully. He got up and patted her cheek. "No need to thank me. I didn't do anything, after all."

"What?"

"Good night, Hermione." Hari left the Great Hall, whistling softly to himself.

(A/N John)

Not a lot to say here, honestly. We're coming to the end of Year One. And if you think I've messed with canon here...

John Out

Grades Above the Grade

Chapter 13: Grades Above The Grade

Over breakfast the next day, they were regaled by Hermione with the random minutia of Charms that she thought might be important. Every now and again, Hari would interject a point or two-usually about how something might not be on the exams or that it might be slightly different. It was invariably met with a sniff and a, "but we covered it in class" or "that's not how it was done in class". Hari decided to continue with his usual policy of letting her talk everyone else's ears off and stopped trying to help by cutting her off on things not part of the exam.

He felt it was an indictment of the magical world that it was so innocent or clueless about normality (non-magicality? He wasn't sure what the proper term was) that they just outright ignored solutions that didn't use magic. In this case, though, that wasn't really applicable. Of course, it said all sorts of things about their awareness of the world around them that despite all the charms on Professor Tiny's office, he had utterly failed to defend against access through the door in his ceiling behind the permanent illusion of stone. Really, it was only a thirty-foot drop to the floor, hardly something to be overlooked.

Since someone had effectively left the door open for him (not that closing and locking the door counted. Ninja) he felt it was only polite to go find out what was going to be tested. It was highly informative. There were some other... personal effects in the office that Hari made sure to note for later. If he ever needed something from Professor Tiny, there were all sorts of things to use. Uncle Sasori always complained when Hari didn't need to master the art of putting everything back in place to search a room. He learned it anyway, of course, because his dad said he should.

X

X

"Full marks, Mister Potter!" declared Professor Flitwick.

"But we haven't even started!" protested Hermione.

"So?"

"*He isn't here!*" She was nearly wailing.

"I'm not sure how that makes a difference, Miss Granger." He smiled at her. "Unless you dispute that he would manage to earn full marks..."

She trailed off into grumbles and was in a black mood for the rest of the period. Doubly so because she was successfully doing the classwork for the exam without a wand and that was just going to make him more convinced that he was right. As far as she was concerned, that was the *last* thing the school needed.

"Good work, Miss Granger!" enthused the tiny half-Goblin. "I see Mister Potter has been teaching you."

Her muttered words were the closest she'd come to cursing... in hours. Being around Hari somehow caused her to wish that she weren't a well-behaved young woman. More to the point, she wished she felt more at home swearing, because she believed that she would somehow feel better if she could properly vent her frustration.

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"How?" she snarled in Hari's face as he tried to eat his lunch.

"Could you clarify a little?"

"To be fair," added Tracy, "the rest of us are just as lost as Hari, here."

"How does he manage to get a Professor to give him full marks for *cutting the exam* ?"

"Talent?"

"I wish I had mastered banishing already," she spat venomously.

"Why?"

She picked up a roll and threw it at him. He ducked, earning a squawk of outrage from Crabbe when it struck him in the head. It was followed by a sound of joy as he realized there was more food on his plate and he proceeded to dig in with every sign of enjoyment and that he had forgotten the ballistic victuals.

"Oh." Hari shrugged. "You could have just told me instead of demonstrating by hitting a peer with food." His subsequent dodge of a chicken leg without looking in her direction would probably have resulted in massive points-loss and a food fight, but Goyle was so happy to see extra meat, that he didn't care about the grease smearing his hair and the house was still at zero points, so there wasn't anything that could be done. Snape couldn't even give Hari detention, as Hari was already committed to ignoring them through the end of the year.

Dumbledore rose and watched the assembled crowd. When they failed to stop their conversations, arguments, eating, petting, and so on, he raised his wand and conjured a flock of birds. Then he hit them with a booming detonation charm. The screeches and the explosion brought silence as shreds of white feathers fell on the assembled students.

"Thank you for your attention. There are some important announcements regarding the exams which are, as of yet, ongoing through the end of the week. In this case, I must report several things about the Defense exams. The first is to those students who have already taken it. I am sorry I must inform you that your grade is invalidated. Those of you who took your OWLs and NEWTs have

nothing to worry about, as your marks remain in effect. That includes the two of you over there in Ravenclaw whose grades I am ashamed to admit are involved with Hogwarts. I'm talking to Miss Gray and Mister Famni. Both you would have been better served studying for your exams and less how the other looks without clothing.

"Those of you who are slated to still take your Defense exam, you will not be taking it this year. There had been some issues which came up. The first is that Professor Stutterfaces has fled the castle, pursued by the Aurors. Since this is the first time such a thing has happened, shocking as that might be to some of you, it qualifies as an 'exceptionally rare' circumstance under the Hogwarts charter and is therefore grounds for the cancelation of an exam. Miss Granger, I feel certain you will survive the lack of validation by an incompetent in one of your classes.

"That brings me to the third item. I was called away to the Ministry this morning because Cornelius Fudge is a moron. He wanted help with something or other. I think it was making sure that his new policy about the wallpaper for the Ministry was a good one. As it turns out, he didn't really need to see me. When I find out who attempted to prank me by making me think that the Minister is even stupider than he is, I will show my displeasure. While I was at the Ministry, I decided to check up on our now-absent Professor's qualifications. I was *shocked* to learn that the former Muggle Studies Professor lacked any formal qualification for teaching one of the central classes at this institution of magical learning.

"When the Aurors arrived to investigate, they were ambushed and are in mighty pursuit of the perpetrator who managed to clamber out the window while they were blinded. I have it on good authority that they will capture our errant Professor any moment now.

"One last announcement: those of you planning to... celebrate the end of exams, please make sure you are protected. If someone goes home pregnant, being expelled will be the *least* of the worries of the unhappy parents involved." He pointed to the bits of bird that lay on people's plates. "Good night."

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The remainder of the week before the end of the year was spent normally by nearly the whole castle. Several denizens of Hogwarts expressed their displeasure at the fact that Harry Potter had apparently decided to take a vacation early and simply failed to present himself at meals for several days. During that time, he was totally absent as far as anyone could tell, since no one found him. Given that he seemed to have a more complete idea of where things were in the castle than anyone, that might not be proof, of course.

Hari turned up for breakfast the day they were being dismissed for summer vacation, engrossed in a book about Hongul. He was making notes in a decidedly not magical composition book using a disposable pen and eating by levitating the food to his mouth so he could focus on the pages. Every now and then, he would mutter something about cross-referencing something, then make some more notes.

"Where have you been?" asked Hermione (demanded might be a fairer description).

Hari's response was completely lost on them. "Oh, sorry. I've been a bit busy reading up on languages."

"Where?"

"London."

"What?"

"We're doing that again?"

"What thing?"

Hari didn't respond to her for twenty minutes. He sometimes made conversation with the rest of the group at random intervals. His

joining of the interaction had no rhyme or reason and it didn't help that he was speaking in a mix of something like a dozen languages that no one at the table spoke.

Dumbledore flung a burning hex into the bacon on the head table, causing food to launch into the air and rain festive bits of scorched pork-product on everyone.

"So, it is time to end a year of studying and learning new things. I realize most of you did so with members of the opposite gender instead." He gave a half-glare around the hall. "I have no doubt that most of you are eager to leave this institution of intellectual pursuits so that you may sooner empty your heads of all thought and focus on things more important to the short-sighted minds of the very young and innocently stupid.

"Book lists will be sent out over the summer for your classes next year. Those of you taking electives need to inform Professor McGonagall prior to your exit from the castle today. Some of you will no doubt take that as only a suggestion. If you fail to select your classes before leaving, you will *not* have electives next year, your teachers *will* assign you extra work as a result, and if you decide to join electives the following year, you *will* be joining a class of students younger than you. Make of that what you *will* ." He paused and twinkled at everyone.

"The House Elves have packed your things and loaded them onto the Express. As such, you are all free to go. A word of warning: after several incidents in which students were left behind by the train, we are instituting a new policy. Namely: alerting you to the fact that the train leaves promptly in one hour, at which time it will be your problem to return home." Several students rose and were nearly at the door when Dumbledore spoke again. "I probably should award the House Cup, but if you people missed the red and gold papering the walls, then I see no reason to bother your overtaxed brains now. But with that in mind, I need to make a few announcements. Please return to your seats. Thank you.

"The announcement I truly wish to make is to laud Hari Potter as the first student to ever receive, across the board, straight O pluses!" He began to clap and found that no one was joining in. He looked over at the other faculty. "Is there something wrong?"

"I didn't give him an O plus," said Flitwick.

"Nor I," added Sprout.

"I failed him for not even taking the exam!" growled Snape.

"All the more impressive feat, then." Dumbledore twinkled some more.

"Albus," snapped McGonagall, "there *is* no such grade as 'O plus'."

"Which only makes it a far greater achievement than I had hitherto believed." He turned back to the students. "And so with the knowledge that someone has better grades than all of you, you are dismissed. You have just over fifty-five minutes to be on board the train. Good day."

Hari ducked another thrown item of food as Hermione began to rant. He tuned most of it out, since it seemed to be repeating itself and generally was a made of variants of " *how?* " which he got tired of quickly. Draco Malfoy was reduced to a whimpering wreck as his raw skin and recently-grafted cauldron-grown flesh was pelted with a steady stream of foodstuffs while his ears, just healed from their damage in the conflagration, were subjected to a sonic barrage. Up at the high table, Snape sighed and shook his head, already anticipating yet another angry letter from Lucius Malfoy.

The man was mostly annoyed at the cost of repairing the family scion, since Hogwarts was a learning experience, and part of that was learning how not to shoot oneself in the foot. But regrowing thirty percent of his son's flesh, a pair of lungs, and almost all his skin was well outside what Hogwarts was willing to subsidize when the parent of the idiot in question could afford to buy the treatments.

It was part of how the school managed to pay for medical treatment of those less fortunate: when a student with a rich family was badly injured—which was practically a *guarantee* at Hogwarts—not only was treatment not given away, but there was a substantial charge attached to the cost as well. Since Hogwarts policy said that a student couldn't be removed from the school unless the mediwitch on premises was actually *unable* to cure the condition (and even then, the list of clauses countering that option essentially forbade it) parents were forced to part with hefty piles of gold to have minor ailments cured. Worse conditions could do a great deal of damage to a financially independent family. Those with multiple idiot-spawn had been known to be rendered impoverished over the course of a year, spent in one fell swoop before their lessened funds could absolve them of their payments. The bill could, on occasion, grow to such a size that there was no way to pay it off, at which point the debtors were required to render their families unto Hogwarts, the family becoming indentured servants in perpetuity. At the moment, there was but a single relic of this policy: one Argus Filch.

The elderly caretaker was the last in a line that had spent several generations in servitude to Hogwarts after an especially large bill. Despite his grouchy behavior, he was actually quite glad of his position in life. That is to say that if he had been born outside of the condition of being bound to Hogwarts, his family would have drowned him for his lack of functional magic. Instead, he got to live in a huge castle, room, board, his cat, and to threaten little children with whatever horrible punishments he thought would be funny to see them go all wide-eyed about. The hardest part of his job was keeping track of just what the little devils were using to make trouble because he was in charge of keeping the list of forbidden items and had been told that "everything" was not a valid list.

Filch's was the last family to attempt an evasion of a bill to Hogwarts. The Headmaster of the castle was generally a very canny old witch or wizard with a healthy dose of cunning and a certain mercenary streak. Also, they could, to a one, hold a grudge. In the case of the most recent attempt, the family had disowned their idiot son. The

school, of course, paid his medical bills (which were excessive). When the family 'reowned' him following his graduation, the Headmaster of the time had shown up within minutes at Gringotts with a roll of parchment.

"Since the scion of the house has been returned to the family, they now must pay his outstanding bills," had said the man. He smiled. "And I feel compelled to mention that there is an additional 'trying to fuck with me' fee that beggars belief. I highly doubt anyone has sufficient funds to pay it alone. Oh, and there's compound interest. Let us say seventeen percent per day. That sounds about right. Now get those sons of bitches down here to sign some slave contracts before I get annoyed in this nice, stable bank."

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"You heard Professor McGonagall!" Hermione was grousing as Hari looked up from the book he had been pretending to read (he'd been reading the one in his bag). "There *is* no such grade as 'O plus', so how did Hari get them?"

"Talent?" he interjected.

Blaise had an arm around Hermione's shoulder and was trying valiantly to calm her down, but she had a full head of steam going. "And you didn't even show up to several exams! How did you not fail them?"

"Even more talent? Truly, I am simply more skilled than you." He lay back and the large copy of *Hogwarts: A History* slammed into the wall of the compartment then sat up quickly and it fell onto the seat behind him.

"To be fair," said Daphne. "Are you really all that surprised? I mean really?"

"No! And that makes it worse!"

"There's just no pleasing you, is there?" snapped Pansy.

"What?"

"Oh, you're doing that again," said Hari.

"I mean that you're not happy that Hari did something you expected of him, or at least don't find shocking. You've been in closer proximity to him than anyone for the better part of eight months and you're still getting upset." Pansy shrugged. "I think the rest of us just decided not to worry ourselves if the universe is collapsing around us."

"Speaking of which," said Hari. "Do you want to borrow my books over the summer?"

"What?"

"I'm going to pretend that's a yes." Hari lay back and dozed lightly until they pulled into King's Cross.

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"See you guys in a couple months. I have to go home and see if my Uncle managed to kill my Uncle or not." He waved. "Bye now."

He slipped out of King's Cross and headed for Diagon Alley, where he met up with a glowering Severus Snape.

"Why couldn't I give you your portkey at the castle instead of waiting here for you?"

"No idea, Professor. I guess I'm supposed to get something out of riding the train?"

"Hn."

"Hey! You sound like my dad!"

"WHAT?"

"Bye, Professor." Hari vanished.

(A/N John)

Finally, the year is over. Forty-six thousand words into a story I expected to be maybe ten-thousand total. Yeah.

(A/N 2 John)

Those of you who are wondering: no, Stutterfaces did not attack Aurors. He was sitting in the room where Dumbledore wanted him to be interrogated at his leisure. But he couldn't tell anyone that. So he set up a trap and yelled "He went that way!" while they were blinded.

John Out

(A/N Spoon)

Happy New Year!

It's Spoon's Fault

Chapter 14: It's Spoon's Fault

"Hey dad, guess what I-oh gods!" Hari threw himself down as his father's eyes went from sleep to Kaleidoscopic Sharingan and a blob of dark fire shot in his general direction.

"Dad! It's me!" Hari pulled the invisibility cloak from his head.

"What."

"I'm home!"

"How did you sneak up on me?"

"This magic cloak I got at school. It makes me invisible."

"That shouldn't be enough to keep me from sensing you in my sleep."

Hari shrugged. "Why didn't you tell me you owned something this awesome?"

"What."

"The note not from the Headmaster said he got it from my father."

"Hari..." Itachi sighed. "You *do* recall that you're adopted, right?"

"Yes?"

"So you have a *biological* father out there somewhere."

"Yes?"

"And people might be talking about *him* when they reference your father. Especially if they knew him."

"Oh. OH! Oh wow, that makes more sense!" Hari grinned. "I wondered how Professor Snape could hate you so much when you'd never been to England."

"I'm not asking."

Hari trotted out of his father's room. "HEY EVERYONE! I HAVE GIFTS!"

Itachi sighed again and rubbed his eyes. They hurt and his eyesight was getting worse, but he'd reacted badly to the shock of someone suddenly talking next to him. He still had a few years left before he'd need to face Sasuke.

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"Hi, Uncle Kisame!"

"Hey brat." Kisame reached out and cuffed the kid upside the head. Someone else would have been decapitated instead of merely stumbling a bit. "How was..." he snickered. "School?"

"Actually, it was pretty fun." Hari grinned as he casually dodged a swing from Samehada. As he expected, his kick to his uncle's face didn't even annoy the giant man. "I met someone bigger than you, for one thing." He made a 'wheee' sound as Kisame flicked him off his sword. "And there were lots and lots of secret passages to learn. If I ever need to kill someone important there, no one will find me."

"Already planning for graduation, then?"

"Yep. But I don't think they graduate like that."

"Shame."

"Yeah. But I made friends. Or found people who kind of like me and spend time with me."

"Close enough." Samehada took a chunk out of the floor as Hair landed on the sword again. "What 'magic' did you learn?"

"Not a lot, I admit. I think they wanted to make sure we understood what we're doing first."

"Pussies."

"But I did a bit of self-study. It's sad just how little they taught, considering the number of wa-eeeeess!" Hair landed feet-first on the wall. "They have to kill people. Really unenlightened, that bunch. I can't do most of it yet, but I'm working on that."

"Good. Now what was it you said about gifts?"

"Oh! Right!" Hari abruptly turned and exited the room, dodging Kisame's swing as he did.

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"Hey, Uncle Pein!"

"Hari." Pein turned from his giant map. Over time, it had gotten significantly more detailed as Sasori's web of informants spread ever-wider. There were currently more than a dozen figurines in various places.

Sitting in the middle of Fire Country was a white robe with a red hat. In case anyone missed what the figure was for, it said "fire" on the hat. Similar figures were in the other four of the largest lands. A cat and an octopus-bull in Lightning, a monkey and a... thing... in Stone, a slug and a turtle in Mist, a fox in Leaf, and a beetle in Waterfall. There was another slug and a pig on a town in Fire. Leaf was crowded. There was a raccoon sitting inside its drawn walls, as were a pale snake and a figure with warts standing on an inky pool. Crowded into there were also an iron hand formed into a fist, a

sleeping dog with one red eye open, a slouching monkey with a fan clutched in one hand and a loincloth that said "fire", and a bed made of obsidian. There was also an upside-down tree with little figures with white faces balanced on it. There was a decrepit female vomiting a red tide with bits of black-dyed cotton dribbling from her mouth nestled deep in Water with a white sphere alongside her. In Cloud was a female figure made of pumice. In Sand was a little white marionette, weathered with age and a woman with a pile of dust at her feet and a ball of fire in her hand.

"I got everyone gifts!"

"You what?"

"I was traveling and got people things. Could you call them?"

Pein sighed and turned away from his map. "I have a feeling I will regret this." His hand rose and a gong on the far side of the room slammed itself against the knocker behind it.

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Ten minutes later, the Akatsuki had gathered.

Hari beamed at everyone. Then he was slammed to the ground as an orange-masked figure tackled him. "Tobi missed Hari!" shouted the man. "Without Hari, Tobi got blamed for *everything*!"

"If it makes you feel better," replied Hari from under his most exuberant Uncle. "I got blamed for everything that happened at my school." He paused. "To be fair, they were pretty much right, but still..."

Itachi picked up Tobi by the collar and set him at the large meeting table where the others had already sat. "Please refrain from that until after the rest of us are free to return to our own tasks."

Tobi pouted as best he could behind his mask. "Tobi was just happy..." he muttered.

Hari slit his thumb on his teeth and popped one of the storage seals on his forearm. Ten boxes wrapped in gaudy paper sprang into existence and he picked one up. "Here, Uncle Tobi," he held out a small, flat package. "For you."

Tobi tore open the gift and examined the pink circle within. "Tobi doesn't understand..."

"It's got instructions on the back."

Tobi turned it over. After a few moments, Tobi fell out of his chair, laughing.

"I don't want to know," said Pein. "I really, really don't want to know."

"Uncle Hidan." Hari held out his offering.

Hidan opened it and grinned at the book, *One Thousand Obscure Curses or How to Make Everything Dirty*.

"Uncle Kakuzu."

The oldest member of the Akatsuki opened his heavy, lumpy package and found it was a leather sack filled with gold coins. "I still owe you a beating for messing up one of my hearts."

"Uncle Zetsu."

The black half of the duo looked on in disdain as his white side gleefully opened his gift. From inside, a green vine lashed out and began to try to strangle him. The plant-man cheerily worked at keeping it from finishing the job. "Devil's Snare," added Hari. "They have great stuff lying around my school." The gathered ninja nodded—that made sense.

"Uncle Sasori."

The gift was opened with the caution of the un-terminally paranoid. Inside was a jar. "It's magical wood varnish," explained Hari. "It keeps away bugs, strengthens the material, and so on." He got a nod from the hulking figure.

"Uncle Deidara."

Deidara's caution was more born of having tongues and not wanting papercuts. Inside was a cube of gray material.

"Clay?"

"Nope!" Hari's grin was predatory. "It's called Composition Four. Remind me to show you how it works after this."

"Uncle Kisame."

Kisame eyed the package with concern. It had holes in it. When it was opened, from inside came a faint mew.

"Hari?"

"Yes?"

"Is that a cat?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

Kisame gently lifted out what looked rather like a ball of auburn fluff with big, green eyes and a pink ribbon around its neck. Tied into a bow. It mewed again.

"Because it sure *looks* like a cat."

"It's not."

Kisame sighed. "I see you're learning from your father. If it's not a cat, what *is* it?"

"A Kneazle."

"A what?"

"It's a magical creature. They often form attachments with people and live with them. They purr when content and mostly treat humanity with a dismissive attitude."

"So a cat."

"No."

"It's a cat."

"It's not a cat."

"It is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Is-you know something? We're not doing this." The kitten mewed again and batted at his sleeve. "Would you quit that?" Kisame poked it. It licked his finger. "I hate you, Hari."

"I love you too, Uncle Kisame." He turned to Pein. "Uncle Pein."

One of the other Paths stepped forward and poked the box a few times. When nothing happened, the Path used a Chakra Rod to open it. "What?" The Naraka Path lifted out seven identical pendants, each on a string of bright pink beads.

"Well, they have these things called friendship lockets or something," said Hari. "They split in two and each person wears one so they can put them together and show they're still friends or something. But I figured you needed more pieces, so I had them make the set."

"Pink beads?"

"Only kind they had," Hari lied virtuously.

"Right."

"Glad you agree." Hari jumped in time to avoid the laser blast from the Asura Path, landing in front of his father. "Dad."

Itachi formed a clone, which drew a kunai and carefully teased the wrapping open. "Hn." He lifted out a white T-shirt with the legend, "*My Son Went to Another World and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt*".

Hari snickered as he went to his lone aunt. "Did you know that I didn't meet a single person with your hair color in England?"

"Come again?"

"I was just thinking about it and a realized that no one had anything like your hair color." Hari shrugged and held out a present. "Aunt Konan."

She produced a paper blade from a finger and delicately opened the box. She glanced inside and her eyes grew huge. Then her face turned bright red and Hari's Byakugan picked up actual heatwaves. "I got you books for your collection!"

"The-they're moving." Konan's voice sounded very faint.

"Yeah. Wizard pictures do that."

Her eyes bugged out still more as she watched something in one of the books. "What is-"

"Hippogriff." Hari's response did not seem to help.

"What did Hari get you?" asked Pein, leaning over. Then the Deva path was flying out the now-"open" window.

"O... kay then," said Kisame, ignoring the kitten licking his hand. "I'm going to file that under the list of things not to ask about then."

Konan's expression was icy (aside from being bright red still). "You do that."

Hari suddenly grinned. "Uncle Hidan?"

"What, brat?"

"I want to show you something."

"And?"

"So I need you to go about a klick that way." Hari pointed out the broken window.

"What?"

"No." Hari's voice was firm. "I'm not dealing with that shit. Now leave."

"Wha-" Hidan's cry was suddenly cut off as Hari grabbed his face and threw him out the window.

"When you pick yourself up, go where I told you to," Hari called down. He turned back to the others. "Let me show you what I got for myself."

"Why did Hidan just land next to me?" asked Pein as he walked into the room.

"He was being difficult."

"Ah." The orange-haired punk-rocker-lookalike gathered with the other Akatsuki. "What are we watching?"

"My new toy." Hari swiped a bloodied thumb over his right wrist and caught the Barret M95 that appeared from the cloud of smoke.
"Watch this." He casually swung the weapon up at his hip.

"What are you going to do with that?" asked Kisame. "There's no way that has the range to—" the sudden bang cut him off.

"Holy..." Pein's eyes were wide. "Kakuzu?"

"Yes?"

"I need you to go put Hidan back together."

"Come again?"

"He's missing most of his torso. And he's... concerned about the separation of his shoulders from the mass of him that has knees."

Kakuzu shrugged and walked down the side of the tower in the ever-present drizzle.

"That is such *bullshit*!" growled Kisame as the kitten nibbled his palm. "Would you stop that?"

"He has a point, Hari," murmured Konan as she walked over to the broken window, letting the cool air help reduce her scorching blush.
"It's rather unfair."

"I don't plan to use it unless I can't do things the normal way," replied Hari. "It's really unsporting." He paused. "Besides, if I used it all the time, people would be ready for it. And I can't give these out. I mean, if everyone had one, how would anyone be able to go aboveground? As it is, if I manage to work out how to electroplate them with chakra-reactive metal, I'll use lightning to punch through defenses."

The Akatsuki (sans Zetsu) blanched when they considered the concept of such a weapon in the hands of a boy with the Byakugan. Hari had been lucky enough that his eyes were able to see a little shy of two kilometers. If he could reliably hit targets with this monster at those ranges...

"Unsporting," agreed Pein shakily. "Yes." It struck him just how bad it would be if, say, Leaf had access to this. He would be unable to stop Hyūga from just blowing his head off.

Itachi nodded silently. He was glad his son had demonstrated his awareness of reality to the point that he'd worked out how bad it would be to hand that thing out to everyone.

"Yeah. They have better ones that I'll grab next time, but I wanted to practice with this a bit first." Hari missed the fleeting terror on his family's faces as he trotted from the room.

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"Hari," Pein said.

"Yes?" Hari had been sitting on the ceiling of Pein's map room, fiddling with his new gun. He didn't have much working knowledge of runes yet, but he was able to manage passable seals and had been working on the idea of adding a storage seal to the Barret's magazine. It was a bolt-action, so he was fairly limited on his rate of fire already and he didn't want to slow it further by having to reload after every engagement.

"Can I have a word with you?"

"Yes." Hari didn't look up (down? He was never sure about that) from what he was doing.

"I meant that you should come down here." Pein sighed. Ten months had apparently been enough for him to forget his nephew's tendency to take things literally.

"Oh."

"Yes. And when I asked, it was an order."

"Oh." Hari released the chakra from his thighs and landed right-side up in front of his uncle. "What's up?"

"Your gift for Deidara," prompted Pein.

"What about it?"

"How do I put this nicely? You can't get him any more of it."

"Why?"

"You're really asking me that?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you really must know..." Pein closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and glared at the boy. "It's because he destroyed half of the shopping district in Rain, wrecked the drainage for most of the village, caused a flood in the lowland farms, razed a small town in which his target was a single bandit-not, in fact, a school-blasted apart an orphanage in Earth (although I grant he has his reasons for that. I *really* want someone to work with him on his issues there), and, just a small incident here, blew up several floors of my tower."

"He does that without C-4," replied Hari.

"Not in one day!" snapped Pein. "I'm trying to run a respectable organization for missing-nin. It's hard enough to do that given Hidan unable to handle capture-missions and Kisame's lax attitude towards civilian casualties without my explosives expert having little

'accidents' because he's not used to the magnitude of the explosives he's working with!"

"You seem a little upset, Uncle Pein."

"Just. A. Bit. As it is, I'm just glad Deidara didn't make any bigger mistakes. Do you know how hard it is to find someone with his potential? What would I have done if he'd blown his hand off when nibbling on your gift?"

"Asked me to find you a magic specialist who can regenerate it?"

"I'd have been out of-what?"

"There are medics, expensive medics of course, who can regenerate whole limbs off of a person's own genetic template."

"Oh." Pein frowned. "It would have still been annoying. And he might have managed to kill himself. Can they fix that?"

"No idea. If they can, they don't talk about it much. There are a *lot* of books at school and I can only read so many at once."

"You have the Byakugan."

"And?"

"Can't you read them all?"

"Setting aside the difficulty in processing thousands of books at a time, there are plenty of them I simply can't read with these." Hari tapped the side of his face. "And that's not to mention the fact that I'm pretty careful to *avoid* doing that, in case there are books with nasty effects on the reader."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Did you know that there are books that can melt the reader's eyes? And while most of them are labeled-most, mind you-if I read

the warning at the same time as the book, I'm out of luck, aren't I?"

"Well..."

"So it's completely possible there's a way to bring them back. I have no idea, though."

"I see. Nevertheless, you are not allowed to get Deidara more explosives. I don't need those kinds of complaints again."

"Alright, fine. Can I get him ANFO then?"

"I guess."

"Cool."

(A/N John)

I titled this chapter the way I did with good reason. Most of the gifts were Spoon's ideas. Especially the HippoGryffindor. That was completely her idea.

(A/N 2 John)

If you people are wondering how Hari knew what to get, he didn't. He went to a store that sold some things that looked like some of the things in his Aunt's collection and stole a bit of everything they had.

(A/N 3 John)

Spoon is curious to see if anyone can work out all the figurines. Most of them should be pretty easy. A couple are more vaguely designed. And one of them will likely be hard to follow without seeing inside my head.

Visits

Chapter 15: Visits

"Hari," said Itachi. His son continued to read a book he'd brought home. It would do no good to order him to look at him; his son would only point out that he was looking at him. "We're taking a trip." That didn't get much of a reaction and Itachi wondered if this was what having a teenager was going to be like. "To Leaf." There was a burst of wind as his son was suddenly no longer in the chair. The clattering from the next room suggested that he was grabbing weapons.

"I'm glad I have your attention." Itachi walked over to see that Hari was testing various kunai for sharpness. "Because I want to give you some instructions."

"Yeah?" Hari was sealing shuriken into his forearms.

"There is a man in Leaf. He's exceptionally dangerous."

"Hatake Kakashi?"

"No."

"Maito Gai?"

"No."

"The Hokage?"

"He's dead, and no."

"What?"

"He's dead. Now would you stop interrupting?" Hari's head bobbed. "Thank you. His name is Shimura Danzō." Another nod. "He has a force of false ANBU he calls ROOT." Nod. "He's very dangerous."

Nod. "So I want you to be careful to avoid him and his ANBU." Nod. "I'm fond of you." Nod. "So I like you not-dead." Nod. "You're clear: you're not to go near Shimura Danzō, right?" Nod. "Good. I'm glad we had this talk."

X

X

"Dad! Dad!" Itachi sighed as he ducked under Gai's fist. "Look what I found!"

"One moment," Itachi jumped back from one of Gai's strikes. "What did you-dear gods, what is that?"

"No idea. I got it from Danzō's shoulder."

"You got it from..." Itachi's eyes spun wildly and shot a wall of fire in front of Gai, stymieing his movements for a moment. "I told you to stay away from Danzō."

"Yeah. Well. I thought I'd see what was so interesting."

"You are most unyouthful to not pay attention to-dear gods, what is that?" Gai's movements stalled as he caught sight of Hari.

"Danzō's arm, apparently."

Kisame looked up from where he was avoiding Kakashi's attempts to kill him. "What is my idiot nephew holding?"

"The traitor thinks it's Danzō's arm," replied the copy-ninja as he charged a One Thousand Birds, only to dispel it when the Shark Skin got in the way.

"Are those Sharingan in it?" Itachi's voice was a bit higher pitched than normal as he swung a kunai down, blocking the attempt to ram a Lightning Cutter into his spine. Apparently Kakashi had decided to swap with Gai.

"Yep." Hari kicked Kurenai in the back of the knee and bashed her head with the blunt side of a kunai. He figured that if his father wasn't killing people, then maybe this was one of those 'nonlethal' missions; he hated those. He drove the blade into her thigh, just scratching a major artery on the grounds that it would keep her from returning to combat if she woke. "Ten of them."

"Well, it's been fun, Copy Ninja." Itachi's eyes spun and Kakashi dropped. "But I have places to be." Black fire lashed at Gai, sending him jumping back as Itachi and Kisame turned and left the village.

Gai looked around before deciding to get Kurenai to medical attention first. He nearly dropped the shapely jonin as he stood stock-still. "Did he say 'dad'? Youth!"

X

X

"Hari," said Itachi.

"Yes, dad?"

"What did I say about Danzō?"

"That he was really, really dangerous?"

"Indeed. Anything else?"

"That I shouldn't go near him?"

"Very good. What did you do?"

"Got near him?"

"Right again. Why?"

"I wanted to see what made him so dangerous. The last time someone told me that something was certain death, all it had was a

three-headed puppy, some weird vines, a bunch of flying keys, a chess set, a Troll, and a corridor too trapped for me to bother testing."

"Of course." Hari watched as his father closed his eyes, wiping at the dribbles of blood running down the sides of his face.

"I got something else while I was there."

"I should have known."

"Can I have it, dad?"

"Sure you ca-" Itachi opened his eyes. Staring at him in Hari's palm was Shisui's eye with a tangle of gray threads hanging from it.

"Cool!"

"Hari."

"Yes, dad?"

"You may have my best friend's eye on one condition."

"What's that?"

"Tell me how you got it."

"Alright..."

X

X

Hari wondered why his father had described the ROOT as shadow ANBU. It wasn't like they were hard to find, or anything. Right on the other side of six false walls and there they were. It was nice being home-his eyes worked normally here. He'd gotten tired of being as blind as normal people.

For the first time, Hari was thankful to Tracy for her gift. He slipped up behind a ROOT ninja and stabbed her in the back of the neck. Well, it was actually the back of her skull, because she moved at the last moment. He needed to work on his stealth.

He whistled a cheerful tune as he stripped her and donned the ROOT gear. He placed the No Mask on his face and it morphed into the features of the dead ninja. She had been about his age, so his height wasn't going to throw people. He placed her mask on his face and walked to the entrance to the base he'd spotted earlier.

"The Red Hand Hangs From The Tree." The sentry's voice was dull.

"But the roots are where shadow thrives." Hari's skill at reading lips meant he'd seen this exchange twice this morning and knew the passcodes.

"Report to Lord Danzō, Seven Three One."

Hari nodded silently and entered the base. As he walked, he noted points of interest. There were so many curious places. The fun part of any infiltration mission was knowing that once you were inside a secure area, people assumed you belonged. He had expected more from the scary man, but he was beginning to believe that people grossly overestimated danger.

They even had an armory down here. With crate upon crate of explosive tags. He was willing to bet that these people weren't supposed to have those. The mess hall had a dozen ninja in it, eating in unison. It was as far from he was used to as possible. His family ate on their own or as a collective argument. It had been an easy transition in some ways to his school. This was creepy. There were so many places to stop in at that it took him almost an hour to find his way to the office of the man who sat in the center of the web of corridors.

He considered trying to impersonate his dead cover-ninja, but his eyes revealed that Danzō had an implanted eye in his head. It was

active like his father's sometimes was. That wouldn't do. The Copy Ninja of Leaf got to have one because it was given to him. This man told no one. Hari seethed quietly. *Stolen* from his family. Hari unsealed the Invisibility Cloak from his wrist and wrapped himself in it.

He waited for someone to enter the office and slipped in, crouching in the corner and amusing himself by reading the scrolls. They were in code, but it was fun to try and guess what they said. More interesting, was unraveling the mystery of Danzō's arm. He'd had a lot of practice over the past ten months at reading seals and so on. He was still pants at it.

Hari lay in wait until the ninja left the room and Danzō was focused on reading some scroll. Hari slipped around in front of the man and his fingers jabbed out, punching into the old man's skull and snapping back, yanking the stolen eye from his face with a tangle of... were those gray? The man screamed and reached for his bandaged arm, unravelling the wrappings and revealing a gray arm with a red Sharingan slowly opening.

X

X

"And so I ripped his arm off, but he was screaming a lot, so I made him quiet."

"By 'made him quiet'..."

"I cut his belly open, rammed a pair of senbon into his lungs and another into his heart. I sliced every artery I could get to, and stuck a kunai through his remaining eye and into his brain." Hari paused.
"And I cut his head off, to be sure."

Itachi's eyes closed again. "You just horribly mutilated and murdered one of the elders of Leaf."

"Yep."

Kisame was laughing so hard he fell off the log he'd been sitting on. "You just killed the former head of Leaf's ANBU. Head of ROOT!" He clutched at his stomach. "Dear gods, you've probably caused more chaos in the village than anyone... since two weeks ago, when Orochimaru attacked it."

"I didn't just kill Danzō."

"Oh gods." Itachi grimaced. "What else?"

"Well, they had all these explosive tags in their armory..."

"I have a horrible feeling-"

"So I planted a crate's worth throughout the base while they began a recall of agents to search for the attacker." There was a glow on the horizon despite it being early afternoon.

"And you blew up ROOT."

"And I blew up ROOT."

Kisame had tears pouring down his face as he laughed. "Ow!" Itachi had just kicked him in the shins.

"So... about the eye?"

"I really shouldn't let you have it. It's dangerous."

"You promised!"

"I did not."

"You were going to."

"This is true."

"Itachi." Kisame was sitting up now.

"What?"

"You gave the kid a pair of Byakugan. When he was younger than two. I think we can manage an upgrade."

"I'm going to regret this."

"Yay!"

X

X

The attack on Leaf had been the last straw. Uchiha Sasuke had always been a loner, although it was getting harder and harder to manage with a certain blond annoyance on his team. Still, he enjoyed solitude, even if he was slowly learning to cultivate solitude *inside* since outside was a constant stream of thought.

On the other hand, he'd never really been alone in his life. He was followed by the ghosts of the dead all the time. No one in Leaf saw Uchiha Sasuke, they just saw The Last Uchiha. It was pretty much expected of him that he would be the one to kill his brother and redeem his clan. He wasn't clear why they needed redeeming; as far as he knew, being murdered wasn't *usually* a criminal offense. Sasuke was pretty knowledgeable about the laws of Leaf, given that his family had been the police force—he'd made it his business to study them as part of their legacy.

Excepting one orange idiot, everyone saw the Avenger of the Slain or something. And he did hate his elder brother. It was easy to hate him. The murder of his family was actually the least of the crimes he'd committed. Since Sasuke had never met them, he had no real sense of loss when it came to his family. On the other hand, leaving him without parents in a village that saw him as a thing instead of a person? *That* was something he could hate the man for.

His only hope for peace had been that he would make chūnin and get to dally there. It had always been a distant dream, since he was always under pressure to be the best and show that Uchiha were at the top. He didn't understand why so many civilians felt that it was important that he be great, but he felt a drive to manage it, if only to get them to leave him alone.

His hopes had been dashed during his doomed mission to Wave. He'd seen the closest thing he had to a friend (and wasn't it a sad thought that *Uzumaki Naruto* was the only thing that resembled a friend for him?) go down with needles in his flesh and his eyes had bled and then the world has skewed and gone out of sync with his body.

Seeing the future had been a rush, but without time to practice it, it had nearly gotten him killed. It had been enough to stun him and while he was out cold after getting turned into a pincushion, apparently Naruto had gotten annoyed about things and nearly killed someone. Or something. It was nice that someone was upset that *he* was dead, not just the Uchiha.

The chūnin exams had been a total disaster, too. Getting caught by Orochimaru in the Forest of Death had only been the beginning of that mess. He'd been under orders to maintain the Sharingan as much as possible to build up his endurance, so he was having to learn to constantly see the world at a different speed than reality operated. That had meant he hit a lot of trees in that godsforesaken hellhole.

The contradictory orders of not using chakra and using his Sharingan hadn't been cleared up, so he'd continued to use his bloodline, even as he avoided all other techniques. It meant he was constantly exhausted and strained from learning to handle the precognition of his immature Sharingan.

And hadn't *that* been a kick in the teeth, too? He had the misfortune of unlocking his clan's coveted bloodline and apparently people weren't satisfied because it wasn't the full form or something like

that. Since no one had bothered to tell him these things, it had been a bit of a shock when he found out that they wanted more.

His teacher had been singularly unhelpful in that regard, too. Since the man's eye was borrowed and he'd not been on good terms with Sasuke's family, the man knew nothing about the Sharingan. He had no doubt that Hatake had been assigned to him with the plan that it would somehow help with his own bloodline. Joke was on someone else, then, since the man's only answer was "no idea".

The invasion had been horrible. He'd had to face that monster and felt the same sort of bone-melting terror that Zabuza and then Orochimaru had forced into him. His teammate, on the other hand, always took that chilling fear as an insult-treated it as a *challenge*. Sasuke was resolved to never again freeze when his ally was running headlong at something that dangerous. He was hoping his teacher would manage to help with that at least.

But now, he had heard that Itachi was involved in this attack on Leaf. He had little love for his home village, but Naruto did. Since his... friend (he was still working out if Naruto was his friend or just someone he tolerated)... was out of town, he nursed the anger so that it would be fresh for Naruto to pick up when he got back. Itachi's presence meant that people were looking at him again, muttering and wondering when he would be ready to face his brother. The cursed mark on his neck was constantly flaring in pain despite the seal on it.

The last straw had been finding out that his brother was looking for Naruto. Kakashi let it slip when he was sitting vigil over the injured jonin. Again, he felt no real connection to the man, despite the silver-haired ninja's attempts to build bonds. But Naruto cared and Sasuke knew that Naruto would give him grief if he didn't sit by his commander until Naruto got back to actually care about him.

He couldn't let his brother get Naruto. There were precious few people who liked Uchiha Sasuke for himself. At the moment, Sasuke was sure of exactly one. If his brother was hunting the only person

who actually cared about *him* then he had to do something and he had to do it now.

Casual questions about the status of Naruto got him enough to go on and he took advantage of the fact that his team was stood down while its teacher was recovering.

All that led to this, a One Thousand Birds crackling on his hand as he ran down a hallway, feeling the desperate rage clawing at him as he screamed.

"ITACHI!!!!!!!"

And suddenly, someone was holding him from behind. "Hi, Uncle Sasuke!"

(A/N John)

So about this chapter. This one was pretty much my fault. Except for the actual introduction of Danzō's arm. That was Spoon's idea. Oh, and the very last couple lines. Those were her, too. The rest of it was me. And I have to say it's been one of the ones I enjoyed writing the most. Not only did I get the comedy of Hari in Leaf, but I got to write Sasuke. I wasn't actually planning that, nor looking forwards to it, but once I started, I found it was a lot of fun. He's a lot darker than Hari, but I'm not bothering with arrogant. Instead, he's someone who's had a destiny forced on him. He sees the dead everywhere because no one will let them rest and his only friend is Naruto because he's the only one who doesn't give a damn about Uchiha.

(A/N 2 John)

A note about how this story is written. I keep several chapters ahead. This means that if I finish a chapter, I publish the one in the hopper. So most of the time, anyone who comments with an

idea, you're talking about stuff already written. And please don't take that as me asking for long-term requests.

(A/N 3 John)

So... the statues from last chapter.

Everyone got the Kage and Jinchuriki. Shocking. Pretty much everyone got Orochimaru and Jiraiya and Kakashi. Also Tsunade, Shizune, Chiyo, and Pakura.

Iron Fist: Maito Gai - Strong-Fist style. Seriously

Monkey: Sarutobi Asuma. Sarutobi.

Obsidian Bed: Nara Shikaku - the lazy shadow user. Sorry, but Kurenai is simply not a credible threat next to any of these people. The markers are for people who are important to keep track of, not based on some set-theory.

Upside-down Tree: Danzō with his ROOTs. Badum-tish. Honestly, that sounds like the name of a band.

Decrepit figure: Terumi Mei. She's always worried about getting ugly and old. Plus Lava and Steam from her mouth.

White Sphere: Aō. It's a Byakugan

And now *drum roll* the pumice figurine: Kurotsuchi. Pumice=volcanic=lava. And yes, I am aware that she's from Iwakagure. The funny thing about ninja is that they don't always stay where they're supposed to be.

John Out

Conclusions and Skydiving

Chapter 16: Conclusions and Skydiving-Why They Shouldn't Mix

"Uncle what?" Sasuke was distinctly aware that he had someone hugging him from behind. That was not what he'd been expecting when he headed out to confront his brother. And the commentary had sent his brain into short-circuit as he tried to follow it.

"Holy fuck!" Naruto was standing against a wall with Kisame standing over him. "Where the hell did that one come from?" From his perspective, it looked like his best friend was currently being cuddled by a junior member of the Akatsuki, what with the cloak and all.

"Hari." Itachi's voice was that of the long-suffering parent. "Why are you hugging my brother?"

"Because he's family?" Hari paused. "Oh right!"

"Hari! Put the kunai down!"

Sasuke had felt the point of a kunai against his throat as the person behind him began to radiate the most disturbing killing intent he'd had the misfortune of being exposed to. Where others' auras of menace had made him terrified of his own death, this had been the sensation of someone who was killing him because it seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Good point, dad. Stabbing him in the kidneys will make it take longer-familicide should be savored." Now the weapon was pricking his side. This wasn't really much of an improvement.

"No, Hari." His brother was talking to the weirdo hugging him, it seemed. "You're not to kill him." That was an interesting

development. Then again, he figured if his elder brother wanted him dead, he'd never have made it to toddlerhood.

"But isn't that what I'm supposed to do with family?" What was *wrong* with this freak?

"No."

"You did!"

"You can't kill him." That was acceptable.

"You got a whole clan! I just want this one." What?

"He's not strong enough." Hey!

"So I should gut him now, then." The knife was beginning to press against skin through his clothes. Why were they *discussing* this? Sasuke tried to move his arms, but that was a firm grip he was in.

"No!"

"But you taught me that I should kill them when they're weak!" A fair lesson, admittedly. And very Uchiha. From what Sasuke had gathered (not from civilians who had the *strangest* investment in the greatness of the Uchiha for some reason) by reading scrolls in his family's compound, the Uchiha had been much pretty the most poisonous bunch of backstabbing horrors as he could ever be glad not to have been raised by. It wasn't that Sasuke liked children, because he despised the little snot-machines-and D-ranks had done *nothing* to change that position-but he had the idea that children were supposed to have more parenting than being told how to hold a kunai and being terrorized to awaken a rare bloodline. The Uchiha didn't agree.

"I want him to get stronger first."

"That's stupid!" A sentiment that, however Uchiha, Sasuke had to echo. Except that it was in reference to him. Wait.

"I'm not weak!"

"Hush, Uncle Sasuke. I'm talking to my dad." What?

Itachi's mouth opened, but Sasuke beat him to the punch. "Hold on. What's with this 'uncle' thing?"

"Your brother is my dad, duh." Did the person with a blade at his kidneys just say 'duh'? This was officially approaching the most humiliating experience of his life. Naruto's liplock with him still took first place, but it was a near thing at this rate.

He was going to regret asking this question. He just knew it. "How old are you?"

"I'm going to turn twelve this month!"

Sasuke looked at Itachi. Everyone watched as his lips moved in some rapid calculation. "Oh gods! That's sick!"

Itachi blinked. Somehow the conversation had rather gotten away from him. "What?"

"You were eleven when you sired him?" Sasuke shuddered. He'd known his family hadn't been nice people, but breeding eleven-year-olds? Suddenly, the whole mass-slaughter thing was making some more sense. Everyone said that Itachi had been a genius and perhaps he'd taken it badly. "You know, suddenly, I understand why you killed everyone."

"What?" Itachi was slowly looking around, trying to find who was hiding and laughing at what *had* to be some kind of prank. He'd suspect Hari, but his son wasn't usually inclined to this kind of joke.

"I'm so sorry for what happened to you," Sasuke said. "I'm not sure I can go through with killing you. You had good reason."

"WHAT?" Itachi tried to dispel the illusion and found that there wasn't one. His eyes spun into Kaleidoscopic Sharingan as he tried to see

through it. What in the hell had gone wrong with the world?

"You were forced to have sex with a cousin-thank the gods our sister was stillborn-when you were eleven." Sasuke's reading in the family archives had been distressingly enlightening. The Uchiha had always kept things in the family to try and breed the Sharingan true. He turned a bit to address the person holding him at kunai-point.

"You know that's not okay, right?"

"What in the name of all that is holy are you talking about?" snapped Itachi.

"I understand why you killed the clan after that."

"*Hari is adopted!*" Itachi snarled. "I killed the clan to test my powers!"

Sasuke angled his head and saw the swirling Kaleidoscopic Sharingan gleaming in his captor's eye. "Right. Sure." That was why Itachi's son had awakened some sort of mutant evolution of the family's prized eyes at age eleven. It must have been so horrible that he repressed the memories of everything involved and convinced himself that his son was adopted. His family was so fucked up. When he rebuilt it, he would have Naruto advise him on how to make a clan that wasn't so screwed up.

Kisame had stopped towering over Naruto and was now using him to stay upright as he laughed. Naruto meanwhile had tears pouring down his face as he realized his best friend's brother had been so horribly treated. He'd always felt bad for Sasuke because his family was dead, but it was sounding like that might have been a good thing. How awful.

Hari looked up. "Oh."

"What 'oh'?" Itachi was grateful that he was going to be able to pretend that didn't just happen for a bit.

"Your distraction turns out to have not worked at all."

"What?"

"The target used the time to summon a-ohshit!" And then the wall exploded.

In the wreckage stood a giant man, as large as Kisame, wearing bright red and a forehead protector with 'Oil' written on it. "Never fear! The Gallant Jiraiya is here!" He was standing on a toad and began a little dance. "Women love me and-"

"Hey! I know you! Aunt Konan loves your books!"

"-men want to be... what?"

"My aunt back in Rain has your whole collection in her underwear drawer." Sasuke blinked. Why did his nephew know the contents of his aunt's panty drawer? When did he get an aunt? Oh gods, given that story about the boy being adopted, that was probably his nephew's mother-and it was his 'aunt'... dear gods, did she live?

"I'm always glad to find out about fan-did you say 'Konan'?"

"Yeah!"

"In Rain?"

"Yep!"

"What's she look like?"

"Um... tallish. Blue hair. Likes paper. She's really pretty. My Uncle Hidan says the papercuts would be worth it to wreck that. Of course, he only says it when she's not around." Sasuke's eyes had bulged out and his Sharingan was activated, beginning to grow to the third stage as his horror at his nephew's life mounted-was Itachi planning to mate his son with their sister?

"Hari!" Itachi's voice cut in.

"What?"

"What part of 'operational security' did you not learn?"

"Operation? You said we were going on a trip!"

"Screw this. Kisame, we're leaving."

"Aren't we supposed to grab the Power of Human Sacrifice?"

"The hell with that. We're leaving." The Sharingan-enhanced glare was enough to convince Kisame.

"Wait! I want to get an autographed set for Aunt Konan!"

"Hari." Itachi followed Kisame out a hole the huge shark-man knocked in the wall.

"Aw." He turned. "If you could send a set to Aunt Konan, God's Tower, Rain, I'd appreciate it!"

"DAMNIT Hari!"

"Coming, dad!" Hari jumped out after his father.

"Okay..." said Jiraiya. "What in the flying fuck just happened?"

"No idea, Horny-Toad Sage."

"You little brat!"

X

X

"Dad?"

"Yes Hari?"

"Are you mad at me?"

"Why would you think that?"

"You look kinda like Professor Snape right now."

Itachi sighed and stopped his running to walk over to a tree and bang his head against it a few times. "At least you drive your teachers as crazy," he muttered. "No, Hari, I'm not mad at you. Just frustrated."

"Why?"

"My brother seems to have decided not to kill me."

"Oh." Hari paused. "And?" The modifications to his haircut meant that his left eye was now visible, four points whirling around.

"Nothing, nothing."

X

X

Sasuke was glaring at his bowl of broth-with-noddles-in. Thanks to his... he was beginning to suspect that Naruto qualified as his best friend. And his only friend. He really needed to see about expanding his social circle. The past week had been an unpleasant one.

Despite the cheers from the idiots who saw it as some important thing that he unlocked the third tier of the Sharingan, he had spent his time going through more and more of his family's records. He'd read what there was before, but he was going over it with the jaded eye of a ninja, even if he was brand new. It had been nauseating stuff.

If it hadn't required a Sharingan to find, most of the records would probably have been gone. Sasuke had burned them after he read them this time, his Sharingan memorized them for him. He needed to

rebuild his clan for sure now, if only to make sure that the Uchiha had a legacy in the village other than spite and incest and treason.

Hadn't *that* been an unpleasant awakening. Reading between the lines, this time able to remember all the other bits he'd read, and looking at it with the paranoid eyes of someone who'd fought for his life as a ninja... his family had been planning something bad. He didn't know when or what, but it had almost certainly been treason, judging from the fact that these would have been innocent scrolls that could have been left for anyone to find them. The only reason to hide them was that they had a darker interpretation.

And that was to say nothing of the family tree he'd uncovered two years ago by asking in the office of records in the Hokage's tower. The Uchiha had been very closely knit indeed. The worst of it was finding that there was a third sibling under his parents' names. 'Kiko' was recorded as having been a stillbirth. It sickened him to realize now that his parents had hidden away their daughter from the world to use her for breeding.

He felt bad for his older brother. He'd no doubt been trying to protect their sister from further horror. But that didn't excuse the mass murder of the children. Itachi was a rabid monster and it fell to him as family to put it down. It wasn't Itachi's fault, but it needed to be done. Sasuke needed power and he needed it fast.

Itachi was the last of the Uchiha's legacy of madness. He and Konan-Kiko. Sasuke needed to erase the stain of his family from history, wipe out the two remaining memories of those disgusting kin. Only then could he build the clan anew on the ashes of the old. He would definitely be adopting Naruto into the family. The blonde might not carry the blood of the Uchiha (a bit of a plus in this case), but his influence would hopefully result in a clan of nice, mildly-crazy ninja instead of violent, incestuous ones.

X

X

"Hey, dumbass."

Naruto glared at his best friend, although without much hatred. It was hard to be angry at him right now, what with what they'd learned about his family. Besides, he'd managed to find the old hag and talked her into becoming Hokage. He was riding pretty high. And Sasuke didn't mean it, anyway.

"We need to talk."

The blond ninja joined his best friend at the gates of Leaf, ahead of the two Sages who were having a squabble. Naruto wasn't following the whole thing, but he was pretty just it had to do with the pervert and attempting to grope the granny-lady. It was funny to watch the powerful Sage cringe in fear when his teammate screamed at him.

"You heard what my brother said, right?" Sasuke wasn't looking at his friend, just staring ahead. His eyes were narrowed and they weren't their usual black; the Sharingan gleamed.

"Yeah." Naruto had been sad to hear that someone had a worse childhood than him (Gaara notwithstanding). And the scale of how bad it was...

"I need to rebuild my clan."

"Oi, Bastard!" Naruto jumped back several feet. "I know that there was that... incident in the Academy, but I'm not into guys!"

Sasuke's head snapped up to look at Naruto so quickly that the people with them flinched as the cracking sound echoed. "WHAT?"

"You want to rebuild your clan with me?"

"Yes..."

"I don't swing that way."

"..." Sasuke closed his eyes and sighed. "Nor do I, Naruto."

"Oh. Good." Pause. "I'm not using Sexy Technique-"

"Good gods! I do *not* want to have sex with you!" The silence from the three behind Naruto was deafening.

"Princess?"

"What?"

"Did I just hear what I thought I heard?"

"I'm not drunk enough to have imagined it."

"Oh. I'm not sure that's any better."

"You idiot!" Sasuke had Naruto's collar in his hands. "I'm not asking to sleep with you. I want to adopt you into the clan!"

"-because I like Sakura and-what? Wait, you'd be my dad?"

"No!" Sasuke closed his eyes again for a moment. "As a sibling."

"But I don't have the Sharingan..."

A sigh. "This is true. But there are... things about the clan that, well... I can explain once you're a member. But let's just say that I want to add some new blood."

Naruto was silent, but there were tears forming in the corners of his eyes. It was one thing to have friends, but someone who wanted to be family? Even if it was the bastard who was his best friend.

X

X

It was amazing just how fast paperwork like that could get dealt with when the Hokage happens to like you. Despite the hubbub of getting a military dictator sworn in and arranging for various reorganizations

necessary after a major catastrophe, the Hokage had found time to sign the papers that allowed the adoption of Uzumaki Naruto into the Uchiha clan as well as waving the usual waiting periods and several other conveniences that made life easier.

There also hadn't been much in the way of objection. Sasuke had wondered about that until he'd had a chance to talk with the new Hokage. She had bluntly informed him that it was because there was a ninety-day grace period during which objections could be raised and so she had accidentally failed to mention the adoption at all and was planning to forget about filing the paperwork in the records department for the next four months. At least. She confided that she was likely to leave it off longer than that in a drunken stupor because of Naruto. He had said he completely understood and only wished that Leaf allowed underage genin to drink.

X

X

Naruto was uncomfortably sitting at the Uchiha clan table. It was used for formal clan meetings, which meant it had gone unused for almost thirteen years. Prior to that, it had been pretty much in a state of constant occupation; the Uchiha liked their formalities almost as much as the Hyuga. Now it had handwritten notes scattered on it. Most of the details weren't committed to paper, but locked in Sasuke's head. For the last two hours, he'd gone over the details of what he knew.

"And that's why I brought you in. I can't imagine any spawn of yours managing to be that kind of messed up. With any luck, you'll balance it out."

Naruto was pale. He hadn't realized what he was getting into. On the upside, Sasuke seemed to pretty much think that most of his clan's traditions could burn. But still... they were fucking crazy. It was shocking his best friend wasn't a bigger asshole than he was.

"But before we can work on that, we need to erase the last remains of the old ways. Itachi is a mad dog—that makes it our responsibility to deal with him. I can only assume that my sister is similarly damaged at best. At best, she'll be catatonic. Either way, they need to die." He paused. "We will have to hope that you can work your magic on my—our nephew."

"Come again?"

"I want you to punch him in the face and tell him you want to be friends."

"What?"

"It worked on Gaara. And Neji. And the new Hokage. And Kiba, come to think of it. Oh, and that brat in Wave."

"You mean Inari?"

"Yeah. Sure. So you're in charge of getting him sane again."

"Uh..."

"Think of it like this, Naruto: he's been horribly abused and tormented and could really use a friend and a welcoming family."

"Believe it!"

(A/N John)

Spoon suggested I name this chapter "Spoon's Fault Again". She has a point, honestly. Almost all of this chapter is her fault. She was the one who wanted the meeting in the first place to look anything like it does. And then she was the one who said that when Sasuke realized how young Itachi must have been to father Hari, that he decided that he understood why Itachi massacred everyone. When Hari revealed his knowledge of

Konan's panty drawer (a danger of the Byakugan alone, I assure you sick freaks) she said Sasuke would think it was because she was his mother and it was part of the lie they told themselves to avoid thinking about it. And that Hari would be bred into the line with Konan. I admittedly added the idea of a stillborn elder sister, just because it seemed so fitting to just enough "fact" to make the misunderstanding the worst possible thing. Other than that, I'm pretty much only responsible for Hari breaking operational security to ask for a set of Ichcha Ichcha and Sasuke deciding that he had to adopt Naruto to get the clan some blood that isn't tainted by crazy (enter Kushina?).

(A/N 2 John)

I'm also really sorry about the whole cliffhanger thing. That honestly hadn't been planned as a cliffhanger. It just seemed like exactly the place that the chapter should end, rather than planning to leave you folks dangling. Spoon just spoke up though and says she takes credit for that, so I'm letting that stand. If you're upset about the cliffhanger last chapter, it's her fault.

(A/N 3 John)

Plot. Yeah. So this story is occasionally getting plot. I will admit most of it will be Sasuke-related. He's sadly more of a protagonist than Hari. Not that I'm changing the focus of the story, mind you, just noting that he's got more main-character-y traits. So he's likely involved in plot.

On a similar note, I should explain that the reason Hermione tends to feature so heavily is that she acts as a comparatively good barometer of a moderately sane reality and therefore a somewhat acceptable foil for Hari. Most wizard-born tend to accept insanity as being normal.

Have fun,

John Out

My Fault This Time

Chapter 17: My Fault This Time

"Hari."

"Yes, dad?"

Itachi closed his eyes. "A word about your Sharingan."

"Yes?"

"It belonged to my best friend. It is incredibly powerful. I am entrusting it to you. Do not make me regret this course of action."

There was a knock at the door. Pein stepped inside. "Would *someone*," he glared at Hari, "care to explain to me why my lieutenant is currently squealing like a little girl? I already asked Tobi, and he said it wasn't him 'this time'."

"Oh good, he sent it!"

"Who sent what?"

"Jiraiya of the Sages! I asked him to send Aunt Konan an autographed set of *Icha Icha*."

"You *what*?"

"It's her favorite series! She has the whole collection already. I don't get why." He gave Pein a quick hug. "I have to run!"

From deeper in the Tower they heard, "Bye, Uncle Kisame! Bye, Aunt Konan!" Then there was a farting sound and swearing. "Bye, Uncle Hidan! Nice one, Uncle Tobi!"

Itachi and Pein looked at each other.

"Fawkes!" There was a fwooshing sound and then another.

"Itachi."

"Yes, Leader-sama?"

"Explain."

"Well-

"Wait. Did your son give our address to Jiraiya?"

"Indeed."

"So he knows we're here."

"Correct."

"I'll step up patrols."

"If it's any consolation, I suspect the Toad Sage will be too busy training a new protégé to bother us for some time to come. At least that's what I hear."

"It isn't."

Itachi was silent.

"Icha Icha?"

"So Hari says."

"Really?"

"I don't ask Lady Konan about her reading collection. I merely accepted that Hari has inherently violated everyone's privacy as a matter of course."

"So he's seen us naked?"

"He sees everyone naked, Leader-sama."

Pein paused. "Ick!"

"Indeed, Leader-sama."

X

X

FWOOSH

Hermione's head snapped up. "Oh no."

"Hi, Hermione!"

She didn't even jump when Hari spoke behind her. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm checking on your progress. Have you been practicing?"

"Of course not! Magic is against the rules during the summer."

"And?"

"We'll get in trouble if we use it."

A pebble started levitating. "I'm not so sure about that." Hari stepped around in front of her. "Think of it this way, Hermione: would you rather possibly get in trouble, or definitely get hit with your wand?" He thwacked her on the forehead with her wand. "I expect you to be able to keep up in class this year."

With that, Hari trotted over to a frizzy-haired man and his wife. "Hi, Mister and Missus Hermione's Parents."

"Hari?"

"What?" Hari looked up from vigorously shaking the pair's hands.

"My parents are over there." She pointed at a pair of people watching with a look of moderate horror. Neither had frizzy hair.

Hari rushed over. "Sorry about that. Hi, Mister and Missus—" He ducked the swing from Hermione's mother.

"You!"

"Me?"

"You're the reason our daughter has those freakish teeth!"

"No I'm not. She did that to herself." He dodged another swing. "Right. I can see you're busy." He shook their hands despite their best efforts to avoid it. "Make sure Hermione practices her magic or I'll hit you with her wand." He paused. "Ask her what that means."

Hari suddenly had a phoenix on his shoulder. "Bye now." Fawkes burst into flames.

The muggles on the beach stared in horror at the second fireball in as many minutes.

"Mom, dad?"

"Yes?"

"We're leaving. Now."

"Why?"

"Because when people start asking Hari-questions, I want to be elsewhere." Hermione gathered up her towel and began trotting away. "Now, please."

X

X

Fwoosh

"Who the hell is-oh." Blaise Zabini lowered the muggle pistol he'd raised and sighed. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to get a visit here on our completely private villa."

"Hey. Blaise."

"Hi."

"Did you know Hermione is really twitchy?"

"Around you or in general?"

"Yes."

"I see."

"Blaise, what was th-oh." Miss Zabini stepped through the door into the living room and smiled, perfectly manicured eyebrow rising slowly. "You've invited someone to our private estate already?" Her smile turned wicked. "Starting young, just like your mother."

"Mom!"

"And a boy, no less."

"MOM!"

"Hello there," she murmured huskily. She held out a hand. "I'm Circe Zabini. My mother was Greek," she added, by way of explanation.

Hari took her hand and kissed the back of it. "I'm sorry to hear of your recent bereavement."

"Thank you. It was such a shame."

"Yes. I heard. Total accident, from what I understand. Knives so easily move to the mansion from the guest house and all."

She raised her eyebrow.

"It happens all the time." Hari's smile was all mirth.

"Oh?"

"Of course." Hari sat on the couch beside Blaise.

"What a charming young man you are."

"Thank you. I'm working on that."

"Working hard indeed." She made a purring sound.

"MOM! Stop flirting."

"What?" She put on an innocent look. "What flirting? I was just complimenting young Hari."

Hari was watching with a slightly confused expression. Some of this exchange was familiar in the abstract, but he was having a great deal of trouble lining it up in his mental space as relating to him.

"What am I missing?" he asked Blaise.

"My mother was doing one of those things she does. I don't have male friends because she always flirts with them."

"I flirt with the females as well, hun."

Hari's face was blank. There was a step he wasn't getting here.

"And to direct things back to a topic I understand," Hari tried. "Are you by any chance engaged to anyone, Missus Blaise's Mom?"

"That's a rather forward question, young man." She made a show of looking him over. "But if you're going to ask, you should call me Circe."

Hari shrugged. "Are you currently engaged to anyone, Circe?"

"Do you blush?" she asked.

"What?" Hari ignored Blaise's bout of snickering.

"Do. You. Blush?"

"Probably? I mean, I have all the right veins and so on..."

"But you're not blushing."

"Why would I?"

Circe stared at him for a while. Then she looked at Blaise, a perfectly manicured eyebrow raised.

"He's serious, mom." Blaise grinned. "He really doesn't get it."

Circe frowned. "A challenge, then." She had a wicked smile suddenly. "Hari dear, has anyone ever given you the 'talk'?" The smile grew when Blaise began to choke.

"Talk?"

"Oh good."

"MOM!"

"What?"

"Please! It was bad enough the first time!"

"Aaaand on that note," Hari motioned and Fawkes landed on his shoulder. "Sadly, I have to run. I have a few people to drop in on still." There was a swoosh as he vanished in a cloud of fire.

"I like him. I must say Blaise, I'm not sure I approve of your starting so young, and I admit I'm not glad that I shan't have grandchildren, but you chose a very nice young man."

"MOM!"

X

X

Fwoosh

"Gah!" Pansy shouted. She threw down her silverware. "Damn it, Potter! You couldn't have waited until dinner was over?"

"Potter?" snapped her father.

"Father, if I might introduce Hari Potter?"

"You may not! I don't!"

Hari was suddenly in front of him and his wife, bowing slightly.
"Greetings, Mister and Missus Pansy's Parents. I just wanted to accept your thanks."

"Our what?"

"For saving you from your horrible fate."

"Come again?"

"I read the transcripts. You were forced to do things against your will. I'm glad I was able to save you from your waking nightmare. I think that's what you said it was."

"What?"

"And your poor wife from her job torturing muggle children. You are most welcome."

Pansy was staring in horror at her friend, whom she was certain was about to be cursed into oblivion.

"I'm glad that I can be friends with your daughter and thereby teach her to avoid falling into the same trap that you did when you first met whatshisface? Voldi-dork? I can't remember."

Any moment. She was sure that it was any moment; her friend was going to be utterly erased.

"I hope you don't mind if I join you for an early supper."

"We most certainly-" began her mother.

"I'm glad." Hari snapped his fingers and a House Elf brought a chair for him to sit on. "Do you have any rice? Well, I'm sure your elves can find some."

"What?"

"Are you going to do that thing, too?"

"What?"

"You are. Okay." Hari turned. "How's your summer been, Pansy?"

"Uh... suddenly less sane. Do you really think our elves are going to get your rice?"

"Why not? I'm not an honored guest?"

"Well..."

"That's what I thought."

"You're bloody mad."

"I'm not angry at all!" Hari smiled. "I'm feeling quite beneficent." He apparently was unaware that there was a seething hatred coming from the other end of the table. "Please tell me you have something to drink other than pumpkin juice."

"Water?"

"Oh good."

There was a tense silence during dinner. Tense and silent on the part of Mister and Missus Parkinson, who were both trying to figure out how to murder the Boy-Who-Lived without getting in trouble, given that he was being transported by Dumbledore's phoenix. Pansy was engaged in relatively calm talk with her insane friend, discussing the upcoming year.

"I heard we're going to have someone good for Defense this year."

"Yeah?"

"Gilderoy Lockhart. He's just about the most famous Wizard in Europe."

"And that's good?"

"Well, he's famous for defeating monsters."

"Oh. That's cool."

"Yeah. And he's handsome."

"That's... nice?"

"Yeah." Pansy sighed happily.

"Okay then."

Hari blinked as a baby phoenix landed on his shoulder. "Um... Bye?" There was a ball of fire and then a thud outside the mansion. "Sonofabitchwhatthefuckiswiththistransportingbullshitgodsdamnitmot herfuckingsonofaclamshellabiacuntandsomesortoflizarddickpusming ledinbirdshitandshatoutofakittensrectum!" There was another swoosh and then, mercifully, silence.

X

X

Fwoosh

"-

damnbabycan'tgetthefulldistanceyetmyfuckingleftasscheekI'llshowyo
unotgettingthewholewaywhenItossyourflamingrearspawnedofamelte
dducklingandafirestarterinfrontofamovingtruck-oh."

Tracy Davis had her spoon halfway to her mouth. It had stopped there when her friend had appeared on top of the breakfast table, cursing like a sailor. She had thought she was used to the weirdness around him. It turned out not to be the case.

Her father's wand was already moving, but Hari's foot snapped out in an absentminded way and kicked it into the corner without doing anything as crass as looking at what he was doing.

The worst part was her mother's reaction. For a moment, she'd raised her eyebrow. When Hari kicked her husband's wand, she calmly drew the .357 magnum she kept at her hip and was about to plug several rounds into the boy when he ducked and rolled behind Tracy.

"Hey, Tracy. Hi Mister and Missus Tracy's Parents." Hari's voice emanated from behind the redhead.

"You can put the gun down, mum," said Tracy. She was speaking in the slow, careful voice best used around people with large-calibre handguns pointed at one's chest. "Or at least, point it elsewhere. This is my friend, Hari."

Her mother paused a moment. Then she holstered the gun and smiled. "I should have known." Tracy found her mother's response to magic to be one of the more worrying aspects of her family dynamic. Her mother mixed the unflappable nature of someone who was

looking at magic from the outside and therefore didn't take anything for granted, with the outlook of someone who plenty of magic-users would like to kill and had decided to let someone else fill the pine box. In other words, she didn't get surprised by anything because she figured it wasn't remarkable that magic could do it and, at the same time, treated all unexpected phenomenon as hostile and reached for a firearm when confronted with the unknown.

"What do you mean you should have known?" asked her father. Tracy felt it was a sign that her father really did love her mother that he didn't ever object to her tendency to shoot first. That or he didn't want bullet holes in him. She wasn't sure.

"From how she described him, appearing in a cloud of fire on our breakfast table, cursing away is somehow apt." She turned to Hari, who was poking his head out now that he knew the gun was put away. "Would you care to join us for breakfast, dear?"

"Yes, please." Hari sat at the fourth chair. "I've just spent all night popping along from the Parkinsons' residence."

"The... Parkinsons'?" asked her father.

"Yeah. I stopped in for dinner with Pansy and her parents. They were ever so grateful to me for freeing them from the Imperius."

"The Imperius..." Tracy watched her father chuckle weakly. He had managed to plead down to a lesser charge and was out in time to see her take her first steps.

"That reminds me," interjected her mother. "I'm Clare Davis." She held out her hand and was surprised when Hari kissed the back of it. "I just wanted to thank you for retiring my husband."

"Retiring?"

"Indeed. He decided after meeting me that he would rather not be a Death Eater. Your actions as an infant meant he was able to

become..." she paused, staring off into space for a moment. "Ah yes, I remember the term now: a productive member of society." Apparently she had decided not to let that go.

Her father had the good grace to look sheepish.

"So, how much of what our daughter has told us is exaggerated?" Clare Davis leaned forwards, resting her elbows on the table. Blue eyes gleamed with interest. "Did you really manage to end the year with no house points at all?" It was the question her husband was no doubt dying to ask.

"Yep. It wasn't hard. Professor Snape did most of the hard work." Hari spoke as he dug into a plate of scrambled eggs and sausages. "To tell the truth, the easiest part was ignoring detentions." There was a hacking sound from Tracy's father as he inhaled some of his eggs. "I didn't even have to evade anything, just didn't turn up."

"You ignored detentions?" Clare was snickering.

"Of course. Besides, how else was I supposed to be fair to teachers when I had two detentions on the same night?"

"You got away with this?" asked her husband.

"Sort of. I just ignored the punishments."

Tracy had a horrible feeling. It was borne out when her father gave her a leer. "It seems my daughter goes for the bad boys," he gave his wife a sudden kiss. "Just like her mum." And Tracy was shocked her hair didn't catch on fire, given how hot her face and ears were.

"To be fair," said Clare. "There is a difference between 'bad boy' and 'murderer'."

"Not in my case."

"Come again?"

"What's your count?" Hari asked her father.

"What?"

"Oh. That thing. I asked how many people you killed."

"Uh..."

"I bet I have more."

"Um..."

"I lost track, but I've got a few dozen, at least."

Clare was looking half horrified and half amused at the look of humiliated terror on her daughter's face.

"Thanks for the food, but I still want to visit Millie and Daphne before I go do my shopping."

"There's almost a month before school!"

"Yeah, but that barely gives me time to get the things from the real world I want to grab." And then a baby phoenix was sitting on his shoulder. "Why isn't Fawkes showing up?" he snapped at it. "At least it can get me where I want to go. You, though—" Fwoosh.

(A/N John)

I suppose I should start by clarifying that Blaise's mother is not actually interested in Hari. She just wants to make him blush. It annoys her a bit that he's got a serious mental disconnect between sex and himself. In a few years though, he's going to remember this and flush bright red.

(A/N 2 John)

As to the title of the chapter... for once, I can't really blame Spoon for this. This is what happens when I start writing something to kill a bit of time and then it spirals horribly out of control. Case in point: giving Hari a phoenix that's horribly defective.

(A/N 3 John)

Regarding the phoenix: I have not worked out if it's persistently defective, or just a baby. A newborn, in fact, that is still working out how to flame properly. Or maybe just can't actually manage it yet. Regardless, this was a response of Fawkes to getting called all the time. I'm fairly certain that it kidnapped a baby phoenix to take its place.

Visiting and the Keyslot Deer

Chapter 18: Visiting and the Keyslot Deer

Fwoosh

"-

youstupidchickwhyaren'tyouabletogetmethewholewayatonceandinsteadIhavetospenallnightpoppingshortdistancesandyouwon'tletmejustgorunlittlefuckerwhatfireplaceashshatyououtanywaydidyourmotherjustthinkthatnotevenherviolatedquimfulloflavacouldhavemadesomethingsouselessandsyouendeduphere?"

"Ahem." Hari paused, looking at the figure of a petite blonde who was only a few inches taller than him and wearing a tight, red dress. He was standing in a well-appointed living room, although one the furniture of which gleamed with magic to his eyes. "Oh good, you're looking at me." And then Hari slammed into a wall.

"I really need to get the hang of this eye," he muttered. "Seeing the punch coming early doesn't help if I don't dodge because I'm expecting the swing *too* early." He rose to his feet. "I'm assuming that's some kind of greeting." There was a crash as his kick smashed into the underside of the blonde's jaw and she hit the ceiling.

The blonde landed a bit heavily, but Hari was impressed. There wasn't even a bruise. He hadn't tried to hold back. She glared at Hari as she cracked her knuckles.

Millicent came sprinting into the room. "Mum! What's going o—" She sighed. "Hari." The boy in question had closed his left eye and was swaying out of the path of each of her mother's swings. He didn't appear to be putting any effort into it.

"Hi, Millie." Hari calmly smacked aside an incoming punch. His returned palm-strike drew a screech of outrage as it struck something soft, sending the blonde flying. "Who is this, anyway?"

"That's my mother."

"Cool!" Hari dropped below a kick, noting that the woman had somehow managed the attack in a tight dress. It was a skill, even if it was one he rarely saw. And never used. "Hi, Missus Millie's Mom." He tripped the woman, taking an elbow thrust as he did and stumbling back.

"Wait, you know him?" hissed her mother from the floor.

"This is Hari, mum. Hari Potter." She was going to regret this. "The one who sent me the brass knuckles."

"Oooooh." The woman was standing and flitting around Hari, examining him from various angles. "So he knows the right gifts to be romantic *and* he can fight?"

Hari looked vaguely confused. "This seems to be a sort of trend," he muttered as the blonde leered at him with a massive grin on her face.

"I'm fairly certain I don't want to know." Mille sat heavily on one of the couches. "What are you doing here, Hari?"

"Visiting."

"Awwwww..."

"Mum." Millicent turned her head to look at Hari again. "Did it occur to you to, I don't know, send some kind of note or something? Or even just tell me before leaving King's Cross that you might be stopping by? Not even a specific date, mind you-just, again it's a minor point, mention that it might happen at all?"

"Nope."

"What a sweet boy."

"Mum!"

"What? He even drops by unannounced."

"I'm a little lost here. How's summer treating you, Millie?"

"I'm five and fifty with my mother, so I'm improving!" It somehow felt totally normal that Hari didn't react to that. Not even the suggestion that her mother was stronger than her, despite being scrawny in comparison.

"Nice. I'm zero and ten against my father. But I don't think that really counts. No one beats my dad."

"Isn't your father dead?" asked Millicent's mother.

"Of course not."

There was a pause. "I'm fairly certain I remember reading something about them dying." She looked at Millie. "Just a tiny article in the back of the paper, no doubt." She raised an eyebrow.

"Anyway. Anything interesting happen this summer?"

"Eh." Millicent paused. "You know, I think those letters from Pansy and Tracy are making a lot more sense now. And the hysterical one from Hermione, too." Another pause. "Did you really just use a phoenix to appear on a muggle beach?"

"No idea."

"Run that by me again?"

"I guess it was. I was just looking for Hermione and so flamed there." Hari's face darkened. "Unlike the little hatchling that seems to show up every time I try to get Fawkes to come transport me somewhere."

"You... call on Dumbledore's familiar to get around?"

"I guess? Is it his familiar?"

"So everyone says."

"Huh." Hari shrugged. "Either way, now I've got this idiot that can't get me very far. It'd be faster to run, honestly." He glared at the bird sitting on the mantelpiece. It returned the look with one of innocent stupidity.

"So there's a phoenix that shows up when you call for one?"

"Sort of. It doesn't count if it can't do anything useful."

"I rather think it does."

"Meh."

"Just to check," interjected Millicent's mother. "You fight, you get nice gifts, you stop in to say hello just because, and you have a phoenix?"

"Yes?"

The giant grin that Hari was slowly becoming familiar with was turned on Millie.

"Mum."

"Yes, dear?"

"I'm going to hurt you."

"You wish." The blonde patted her daughter's cheek.

"Right. Well. I have another place to be."

"Where?"

Fwoosh

"Such a sweet boy and he's mysterious as well." There was a thunk as Millie's fist sank into her mother's stomach. And then another as Millie hit a wall.

X

X

"DAPHNEDAPHNEDAPHNEDAPHNE!"

Daphne cracked an eye. Just barely. "Astoria Greengrass," she snarled. "You know the rules about waking me up on vacation."

"Don't do it unless I want to die?"

"And what are you doing?"

"Waking you up?"

"I should kill you then."

"But you have a visitor!"

A muttered *Tempus* was followed by a smothered curse. "It's five in the morning. Who would visit at FIVE IN THE MORNING?"

"Hi, Daphne!"

Her eyes snapped open. Hari Potter was standing over her, looking bright and fresh. There was a spinning red eye on the left side of his face. At the moment, she was more concerned with the fact that he was in her bedroom. At five in the morning. Unannounced. And she was wearing her admittedly conservative night clothes.

"ASTORIA!"

"What?"

"Why is he in here?"

"He said he wanted to come with me to wake you up."

For some reason, Hari just had that faint smile of his on his face. He seemed to be mildly amused by something. "Get out. Both of you."

"But this bed is comfortable."

"I know, right?" Daphne was sorely tempted to murder her little sister for letting him in.

"Potter. How do you know my bed is comfortable?"

"I was sitting in it for a while, waiting for Girl-Tobi to decide how to wake you up."

"Decide..." Daphne was suddenly sodden as Astoria tossed a bucket of cold water on her. Then there was a deafening sound as she blew a horn in Daphne's ear.

"She couldn't choose." Hari watched Astoria for a moment. "Shame she can't levitate things yet. Her best idea was to dump you out the window into the rose bushes."

"Hey! You said my best idea was transfiguring her bed into a tub of icewater!"

"Ah yes." Hari's smile was suddenly broad. He leaned back as a soaked fist tried to hit him. "Come on, Girl-Tobi! Let's see if there's breakfast."

"Can I have pancakes with lots of syrup?"

"Does it make you hyper?"

"Yep!"

"Sounds like a plan then. We'll get Daphne up after we eat."

Daphne listened to the footsteps of her sister across her floor and then the door closing and heading downstairs. A cautiously opened eye told her Hari wasn't in the room, despite not hearing him leave. She wished she had a knife. She wanted so badly to gut someone.

X

X

"Good morning, Daphne!" Hari's bright, cheerful voice made her wince. And the sight of the mess that Astoria was making as she devoured her meal, along with pumpkin juice... this wasn't going to be a fun day. "Why didn't you tell me your little sister was awesome Girl-Tobi?"

"Come again?"

"Girl-Tobi! Why didn't you tell us she's awesome?"

"Because she's a pain in my bum." Daphne sat and there was a loud farting sound. Astoria fell out of her chair laughing as the black-haired girl extracted a pink circle from under her. "*What is this?*"

Hari slipped a few pancakes onto a plate and slid it in front of Daphne. "How has your summer been?"

"Peaceful." Daphne glared at the still snickering Astoria. "Compared to school."

Astoria's laughter stopped. "I guess I'm not trying hard enough."

"Don't you dare, you little monster. I already know I'm doomed to another ten months with this one," Daphne jabbed a finger at Hari, who was examining the counter, apparently engrossed in the woodwork. "If you make home less peaceful, I will not be held responsible for what I do." She sighed. "I had even been feeling pleasantly left out."

"Left out? Why?"

"Because while you visited everyone but me, I gather that the visits have been far from enjoyable."

"What are you talking about? I had a great time seeing people!"

"Which is exactly my point. I had been enjoying the relief of knowing that instead of coming here, you were off bothering the rest of my friends. It was nice that by doing so, you weren't here, bothering me." Her glare focused on the blonde girl who was rubbing her hands together and cackling. "And you've managed to infect her. I am truly horrified to imagine what chaos will be the result of this."

Astoria and Hari looked at each other and then gave identical, broad grins. "Chaos is fun!"

"And this is my life now." She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. "Somehow, you've grown on me. I suppose because it was like having my little sister at school... which isn't something I'm interested in, now that I think about it. Well, I'm out of ideas."

"I have a few, but they're for Girl-Tobi."

"Do you know her name?"

"Girl-Tobi?"

"Her name is Astoria. Please at least try to call close relations of your friends by actual names."

"But she's Girl-Tobi!"

"Why me."

"Because you talked to me in class?"

"I am ever-remorseful of that."

"But then I'd never have met Hari Potter!" whined Astoria. "And he's great! Hey!" The last part was because Daphne had finally gotten fed

up and cast a tripping jinx at her sister, sending her tumbling to the floor from the chair she had barely managed to regain.

"Brat! Don't you dare wake me up like that again!"

"Loudly? Or with water? Or with Hari Potter in your bed? What?" Astoria's head cocked to the side as Daphne's face went bright red.
"Ow, ow, ow!"

The stinging hexes were Daphne's response while she worked to get her humiliation off her face. She had no interest in that kind of thing at her age, but she knew what it meant and it was embarrassing. She was just glad Astoria didn't realize what she'd said. And that Hari hadn't made a comment. In fact, he was just looking at her with a vague confusion on his face.

"I have some shopping to do, Daph. Bye, Girl-Tobi!"

"Bye Hari!" Astoria waved happily as a baby phoenix landed on Hari's shoulder.

"Oh shit. Not you again! Really? I couldn't get a working Phoenix? I had to get-" Fwoosh

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Fwoosh

"You..." Hari closed his eyes. "I'm out of curses." The trill from the bird only made him scowl. "This is new. Where's Fawkes!" Another chirp convinced him to just move on.

The alley was crowded, which didn't bother him much. No one looked twice at him, given that he didn't look like their conception of Harry Potter. He strolled idly into large clumps of Wizards and walked out with pilfered gold and other small items of value.

FWOOSH

Hari glanced at his shoulder. No, the chick was still there. Oh. He looked up at the adult form of Fawkes, floating happily in the air with a large roll of parchment.

"My school letter?"

Nod.

"Great."

Nod.

"Would you care to explain the defective hatchling that won't leave me alone?"

Nod.

"Well?"

Nod.

"You're fucking with me."

Shake.

"Did you give it to me?"

Nod.

"Why?"

Nod.

"Yes or no only?"

Nod.

"Oh. Joy. Is it mine?"

Nod.

"Did you know it can't go full distances?"

Nod.

"Did... did you just make him do it so you wouldn't have to?"

Nodnodnod.

"You're an utter bastard."

Shake.

"Bullshit your parents were married!"

Shake.

"I hate you."

Shake.

"Will it ever work properly?"

"I'm not reassured by your lack of response."

Nod.

"You know something?"

Nod.

"Fuck you." He grabbed the bird and slammed it into the nearest building. It struck with a weak squawk and exploded into flames, turning into a pile of ash. "And the rest of you can go to hell." That was addressed to the crowd of horrified onlookers who just watched him kill a phoenix. "This is suddenly going to be a long fucking day."

The next hour or so was spent fading into the background. Despite people remembering him, they also forgot as he put his training to use. It was easy to be memorable, but he'd learned to be forgotten. Always best that enemy ninja not have an accurate description of the person who murdered their lord, after all.

To spice things up, he shoplifted random objects that caught his eye. Magic might be good at detecting theft, but he was good at stealing things and the alarms tended to go off after he was far away. It was a knack. Uncle Tobi taught him how to do that. He stuck to small things, since he had no interest in trying to add more seals to his arms to store large objects.

When no one looked twice at him, he slipped into a shop and walked out with a trunk. It had plenty of things in it, but since they belonged to a seventh year girl, he left a trail of debris behind him as he emptied it while walking towards the bookstore. On his way, he made a stop in the apothecary to leave with a large amount of their stock. He wondered what it was like to be a civilian and *pay* for things.

There was a huge line, but that wasn't really something that bothered him. He simply pushed anyone in his way out of it.

"All hail Harry Potter, Lord Slytherin of Chaos!" Hari shrugged and then took an exaggerated bow. He was always amused by the antics of the twins. Once they decided he was a good person (or funny, anyway) they had left him alone. Except for things like this. Both of them were applauding while kneeling.

"Thank you, thank you."

"As I live and breathe!" There was a gold man coming at him. Odd. "Harry Potter. Well, my boy, we must have a picture together!" The man gave a huge smile. It didn't glint. He'd seen better.

"Who are you?" Hari's head cocked to the side. "I don't think we've... oh." He'd been consciously ignoring his eye for a while, but the captioned pictures were pretty much everywhere.

"Gilderoy Lockhart, my boy!" The smile was radiant and the hair was impressive on its own. "The roguish daredevil hero!" There was a sigh from the female part of the audience. "Banisher of the Ballywog Banshee, Warrior of Water-on-the-Nays, Destroyer of the Dancing Demon of Downton!"

"Have you ever met a man named Jiraiya?"

"Savior of Saint George's-what?"

"You really should meet him. You need his dance." Hari strolled through the crowd, absently skimming a few of the advanced books. "Why are you following me?"

"Why to fulfill every child's dream: having his picture taken with me!"

Hari didn't turn. "At the risk of sounding stupid: what?"

"Come now, you're a lively young lad. No doubt you've heard of me."

"Not really."

"And naturally, you'd like your picture taken with the famous Gilderoy Lockhart, five-time winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile award."

"Meh. I've seen better. And it had a sunset in the background for some reason." Hari put down a book on Runes that he hadn't understood at all and moved on to *16 Ways to Butcher Your Own Cattle*. Why authors never considered that a spell able to carve a steer from hoof to hock could more effectively be used on a less sturdy human...

"Bozo, bring the camera over here. Rita will be furious she missed a chance to report on this." Lockhart turned. "Where did he go?"

Hari strolled out of the shop without buying anything. There wasn't a point when he'd memorized the school books he'd need. A scuffle appeared to be breaking out between a foppish blonde man and

someone who could only be the Weasley father. On the side was the multi-sided melee between several women who were trying to get a few scraps of hair that the famous man had left in his wake.

Why did that man want to accost him, anyway? That had been so odd. He'd been going on about famousness an awful lot. Hari knew famous people and they mostly didn't show off. Granted, it was hard to when everyone ran away shouting something about "please, gods, not me!" and so on, but still...

And why was that blonde man dropping a book into a cauldron of used school books? The thing glowed with magic. Hari was tempted to grab it, just to find out what it was, but he had enough books to decipher. Which reminded him, he had to go get some more language books.

(A/N John)

You know something? Not a lot to say here. I enjoyed writing parts of this more than others. Girl-Tobi is definitely going to become a regular. Also, Hari was referring to having seen the smile of Maito Gai. Compared to that, Lockhart just isn't cutting it.

Killing Time (Oops)

Chapter 19: Killing Time (Oops)

Hari spent the rest of his time before school in the normal world. There were so many books on language to get his hands on. Or, rather, to get his eye on. He'd discovered the wonderful aspect of his new eye which meant that he memorized everything it saw. So instead of stealing books, he just flipped the pages and then read it later. He was pretty sure he was getting the hang of Hangul, but probably not sufficiently to try reading an unknown magical text.

In point of fact, a good bit of his time was actually used to make sure he could reliably move around. He'd been doing alright by mostly keeping his left eye shut, but it was difficult to deal with the fact that one eye saw for more than a kilometer and the other saw a few seconds into the future. He'd really hoped the streams would cross and he'd see a bit into the future within the range of his Byakugan. That hadn't been the case.

There was one other thing he had to work on. He had a cool new eye to practice with. He'd promised he wouldn't abuse Uncle Shisui's eye, and he wouldn't, but he *did* need to understand what it could do. His father had been unusually cagey about details, other than to say that it was Distinguished Heavenly Gods. He'd described an illusion greater than all others, grudgingly admitting that it even exceeded the Moon Reader in power. The specifics though? Just that it was capable implanting suggestions.

There had been something about a once-per-year limit, or something like that, but Hari had kind of tuned it out. He wasn't sure he'd gotten a good deal. He hated illusion techniques. Why he couldn't have gotten an eye like his father's: something that flung unquenchable fire or the like? Still, nothing to be done but test. If it took a year to recharge, oh well. It wasn't like he used illusions much anyways. Never, now that he had that Cloak.

And so he picked a random woman in London. He'd been wandering through Harrod's to see if there were anything interesting to him (there had been some shiny gems he'd walked out with) and spotted what had to be the most ordinary female he'd ever seen. He wouldn't have been surprised if her mother had regularly left school with the wrong child. She was, therefore, a nice baseline to test his abilities on.

The first warning she got was when he was suddenly standing in front of her, Sharingan spinning madly. He discovered that it wasn't as easy as just wanting to implant a suggestion then. She'd ended up standing like a doll for several minutes as he worked out how to do the thing. He wondered if his father had been right and he should have practiced illusions more. He might have found this easier.

Eventually, he managed it and she proceeded to jump up and down the entire way out of the store and on down the street. He wondered if he should have added some sort of trigger to end the compulsion to jump at all times. Then he shrugged and dismissed it as a learning curve. There was an odd lack of pressure behind his eye. It was something he hadn't noticed until it was gone. Probably just the cooldown.

The rest of the day had been spent in the wonderful migrant community, enjoying that no one looked at him oddly when he asked for the kinds of food he liked. Well, except for him looking totally wrong to be asking for it, but that wasn't an issue. And this time around, the locals were confronted by that same odd child who'd been there last year, but was now speaking their language with a truly horrible accent. On the upside, most were willing to correct that aspect and some also would help when he used the wrong word (and often the wrong word order).

One family was nice enough to put him up for a few days after he escorted a particularly unpleasant drunk from their establishment. It was nice not to have to break into a hotel just to get a bed. It wasn't the greatest accommodations, but it had the advantage of getting to practice his Japanese a bit more.

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Oddly, the next day he woke up to that pressure in his eye. He decided to test something out and told his hosts he would be back later (accidentally telling them that he would be back chicken). Then he headed off into greater London to see if he were right.

For the sake of his experiment, he went with a different demographic. It took a while for Hari to find a biker gang, but he'd read about them and the idea amused him. Also, he'd come across stories that made him think they weren't nice to civilian women. As a result, when he found a nice, angry-looking, leather-clad man, it was time to begin.

This time, he tried a different method. Hari felt Distinguished Heavenly Gods trigger and the man straightened up. Where he'd been slouching before, he had good posture and looked down at his attire in horror. Hari's small smile turned slightly worried when the man proceeded to rip his clothes off and go running down the street, screaming he needed proper clothing. He'd intended that the man should get new clothes and generally become what the man believed to be a respectable member of society. This wasn't what had been expected.

Hari shrugged. It wasn't really much of a loss, all things considered. He'd have to be a little more careful in the future. But on the upside, he'd learned that the suggestion was pretty much all-encompassing. A bit of a risk, that. It could be so much fun. He'd find out if it still worked again the next day.

The next several hours were spent in memorizing more and more books from the nearest library. As far as Hari knew, there wasn't an upper limit on what the Sharingan could store, so he just added as much as he could.

That night, he entered a meditative trance instead of normal sleep and went through the books in his head. It was one thing to have them in the Sharingan and another to have them in his mind. Having memorized them, he took the time to actually assimilate the knowledge.

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In the morning, his eye was apparently recharged again. He resolved to mention to his father that there was something slightly off with his estimates. In the meantime, he was going to see what else he could do. There was a broad grin on his face as he wandered towards the Leaky Cauldron. It was probably wrong of him to test this, but he was curious.

A man in a business suit was suddenly possessed of a desire to enter Diagon Alley. He stood around, very confused as he tried to comply with the instructions and then wandered off with what looked like a devil of a headache as his mind kept telling him to do the impossible. It was rather disappointing after his earlier successes. Oh well. Perhaps another day.

Which meant he needed to do something to kill time. It was just a shame that mercenaries here were all adults. Otherwise he'd have killed something to kill time. He supposed he could just rob people, but didn't see the point when he didn't really bother to pay for things much of the time. Money was more of an excuse to go on missions than something useful.

He was given to understand that birthdays were important in this place, so he might as well get a start on his thieving. Hermione was easy enough to get something for, barely had to think about it really. People needed to learn to lock their doors more. And Millie was similarly easy to get things for. The problem was that the rest of his friends had more... complicated tastes. Come to think of it, he knew

what to get Girl-Tobi. On the upside, finding muggle toys for his other friends managed to take up most of the day.

In actuality, it ate much of the following day as well. He got so wrapped up in trying to find the way to get Blaise's gift that he nearly forgot to test out Distinguished Heavenly Gods. Really, it was so hard to pick the right one and those men in the red suits and big hats had a definite air of people who didn't wait to ask questions about why someone was wandering around. And more importantly, they carried weapons with a certain degree of skill. He wasn't yet ready to see if he could dodge bullets using the Sharingan, so he decided that it might be wise to avoid getting shot. And the Cloak would have been unsporting when he could do it on his own. Cameras were a bitch to avoid, too. They had them everywhere in the place. Took hours to plan a path that let him collect everything before the alarms went off. He really hoped that tapestry he's set on fire to get attention elsewhere wasn't important.

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The woman wandering by the Leaky Cauldron today was surprised to find that she had a pressing desire to enter Diagon Alley. And that she knew where the Leaky Cauldron was (although she had no idea *what* it was) and remembered to ask the toothless man behind the counter to let her in please because she forgot her wand (whatever the hell that was).

Hari watched her step into the pub and smiled. That had gone better than expected. Just adding a few extra bits of knowledge and a couple of instructions was enough to send a normal person into the magical world. Excellent. He had no idea what he planned to do with this knowledge, but it was the kind of thing that he had no doubt would be useful at some point. In the meantime, he would continue his testing to see what else his Kaleidoscopic Sharingan could do.

He almost wished he had some use for blackmail, given the number of people he saw having affairs on an hourly basis. Actually... it killed another day, staking out some places that had things he might want at some point and then following personnel around to find out which of them had dirty laundry (and didn't most of them just?). Of course, some of them might no longer be on staff when the time came, but some of them would be useful. A stolen camera was a wonderfully useful thing.

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There were only two days before the express, so he resolved to make the most of it. First thing was first, his test of Distinguished Heavenly Gods needed to be finished before school began. Though he could always just take a trip if he had to. He was standing on the curb when a car pulled up. At the wheel was a grossly fat man with a huge mustache. There was a purpling to his features that spoke of bad temper and bad health, his Byakugan confirmed the latter. He was shocked the man hadn't yet keeled over of heart failure. Beside the ugly lump was a rail-thin female with a face like a losing jockey's mount. Add to that the fact that her nose was stuck in the air and her eyes flitted around eagerly looking for bad things other people were doing and an expression that said she wanted to see scandal. And if it weren't for his Byakugan, he would honestly have thought that someone had decided to drive through London with a pig in the back seat of the car and, just because it would be funny, stuck a blond wig on it. Actually, that *did* sound funny, but in this case, it was a human. For a given value of human. Time for a last test.

When Distinguished Heavenly Gods took hold of the man, there was a sudden mad grin on his face. He slammed down the gas and took off roaring down the London street with his wife shrieking, weaving in and out of traffic. That hadn't been what Hari had in mind. He raced after the car, already having a bad feeling about this. He was just in time to see the car swerve hard and crash through the rails on the side of London Bridge. He could see the glee on the man's face and

the horror mixed with resigned terror on the face of the wife and son as the car plunged downwards and smashed apart on the water.

That had been... disturbing. He had intended it as a sort of demonstration of the absolute limits of his abilities. A sort of destruct-test. Hari had rewritten the man as someone who would cheerfully murder his family before offing himself. He had thought that it was a command that would be instantly thrown off. While nothing else had been, that was far more extreme than anything he'd done. Well then.

Hari stared at the wreckage floating on the Thames. Apparently, he had been playing with a power that made him a god. He was a little sickened. He had no problem with killing, even with collateral damage from not bothering to aim carefully when he fired an attack. This was something else. He'd just made a man deliberately slaughter his family with every sign of happiness. Hari realized that he'd been standing there for more than an hour. More than that, even. The sun had begun to set.

He couldn't play with this eye anymore. It was finally dawning on him what his father had entrusted him with. This was a horrifyingly powerful ability. No one should be able to do what he just did, but his father had granted it to him and believed he was able to handle it. So he would be careful. There were no checks on this but what he imposed on himself and for the first time, he was thinking that he should have limits.

Hari was the custodian of this terrible gift. His use of the power was limited only by his self-control. Well then, he would have to be careful with this. There were limits to what was amusing and what was an abuse of people unable to defend themselves just because he could.

Hari shook himself. He wasn't going to spend his time moping over this. He knew the new rules, that would be enough. He needed to cheer up. He knew just what to do, too. He just needed to figure out where to get a blond wig and a pig.

(A/N John)

While this chapter has been done for a while, it was genuinely the one that took the longest to write. Me and Spoon took a lot of time to work out how to drive home to Hari that Kotoamatsukami isn't something to just treat as a prank. Or, at the very least, to be aware of just what it is he's playing with. I'm certain that he's going to abuse it still, but he's going to be much more cautious about it. Hari recognizes that this is a scary ability that he'd hate to have used against him. Honest, he'll be responsible!

(A/N 2 John)

Also, this chapter took so long to come out because, as I've noted before, chapters are published when the one a few ahead is finished. Spoon and I basically didn't get a chance to write this week because we do it over dinner and she was busy having headaches or whatever. Also, snow.

(A/N 3 John)

No points if you guess who died.

(A/N 4 John)

Minus ten if you don't get it, though.

The Express Locale

Chapter 20: The Express Locale

Hari was still snickering as he prepared to leave his temporary hosts. They had been mostly quiet, not wanting to know why the weird white-boy who acted like a normal person who couldn't speak Japanese (well, not properly, anyway) was suddenly giggling all the time. What time they had spent with him had given the impression that he had a very physical sense of humor and it would be best not to ask, in case anyone questioned them; his gales of laughter at the headline of the newspaper had been worrying.

It was on the lips of many people, even here in an area normally somewhat withdrawn from London politics. The Minister for Foreign Trade had been seen driving around with a pig in the back seat of his car. There were a few problems. The obvious one was that as an important minister, someone drove him and so he had been sitting in that back seat. Then there was the slightly troubling fact that his mistress had been with him in said seat. The somewhat more scandalous aspect had been that he and his mistress had been in a state of... dishabille when they had arrived at their destination and someone had opened the door. There had been the Minister and a woman who was not his wife... and a pig (in a wig) who was *also* not his wife. And someone had managed to get a picture.

Hari didn't understand sex in reference to himself as a participant, but he'd been a ninja for his whole life; he'd seen plenty of couples (and moreples) with his Byakugan and helped Uncle Sasori blackmail people. But most of his enjoyment came from his training with a different uncle: Uncle Tobi had taught him how to grab people who'd passed out in a brothel and how to pair them off in ways that would lead to maximum screaming. Especially politicians.

He hadn't planned this one, he'd just gotten lucky when he picked the first car to come by once he managed to get the sticking charm

settled properly on the pig's head. He'd seen what was going on, but hadn't really thought about it beyond a small snicker at thinking about the woman's face when she realized what she was lying on while kissing the man. This had been luck on his part.

Hari had missed this. Even Hogwarts didn't have such wonderfully unbridled chaos. He would have to do something about that. Maybe. He had a busy year ahead of him teaching two pupils at once. Still, time needed to be made to make things a bit more interesting for everyone. Perhaps something involving a Prefect?

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The walk to King's Cross was uneventful. Hari casually sidestepped the car that jumped the curb and slammed into a crowd of pedestrians. It was odd, the flash of magic at the steering column. And there appeared to be a House Elf following him. The things that happened in his life... Actually, what was odd was that a second car had the same mechanical trouble. And then a lorry. And a bus full of tourists. And then...

By the time he got to the station, the streets were choked with emergency personnel trying to get to the scattered wounded. Traffic had ground to a complete halt, which meant that the two cars nearest the entrance to the station just crunched to the ground when they were tampered with. Someone really had it out for the normal people, using magic to hurt so many of them for no reason.

The station itself was even more crowded than usual, given the number of people who had decided to try and get closer to home via mass transit. There wasn't going to be anyone getting there by car for a while. And in that mix were the last of the magicals, trying to unobtrusively enter their secret platform while almost being squashed by the horde of normal around them.

Hari was running late in no small part due to his staying around London for a while, enjoying the sights and trying listening to the endless speculation about the Minister whose resignation was expected any minute now. There were already crass jokes about how he could tell which was his mistress, which Hari felt was a shame, because the woman had been pretty enough. On the other hand, the questions of how *she* knew which was which...

That and the fact that he'd picked up some more samples of proper food for the House Elves. They were good at what they did, but he wanted to see if they could learn to make little cookie-sticks dipped in chocolate. The locals had an actual name for it, and it was so much easier to say. He intended to bring that home.

The barrier glowed. That wasn't right. Well, it always glowed, but it had more glow than usual to his Byakugan. He grabbed a trolley and flung it at the barrier. It crumpled against the brickwork. Well then, he wasn't poking that.

On the other hand, the train had probably just begun to pull out of the station. He didn't really feel like using the phoenix. If nothing else, it'd take him more than a day to get to the border with Scotland if he did, let alone to Hogwarts. And besides, he didn't like the little bastard. Oh well, nothing for it.

He trotted out of the station and around the side. The tracks he was looking for glowed. Hari sprinted along. The train was still in sight for him, and it got closer as he ran. He slammed a hand against the metal and used chakra to stick, nearly yanking his arm out of its socket as he pulled himself to the Express. Just as well it was still working up to full speed.

It was the work of a few moments to haul himself onto the side of the car and begin strolling along. The wind was blowing hard, but he'd once been too close to Uncle Kakazu's Pressure Damage. He tucked his hands into his pockets and went to visit his friends. They'd picked a carriage near the front, so he had to travel much of the length of the train.

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"-and that's why the second of the laws for Transmutation we're going to learn this year is... why are you all staring at me like that? I wasn't that boring, was I?" Hermione sounded a little unsure of herself. She'd found she liked it when people learned from her.

"No," said Blaise.

"Not really," added Tracy.

"I stopped listening halfway through," replied Pansy.

"So what's the matter?"

"I'm hallucinating?" Millicent was frowning. "I think."

"Just for the sake of an argument," said Daphne, with the cautious tone of someone probing a wound, "what are you hallucinating?"

"That Hari is looking in at us through the window."

"Huh." Daphne considered for a moment. "Perhaps it's a group hallucination?"

"Come again?"

"I'm seeing the same thing."

"Me too," Tracy was rubbing her eyes.

"That's not possib-" Hermione didn't turn. "It's Hari." She sighed. "Blaise, would you open the window and let him in?"

Blaise shrugged and unlatched the window. A mildly disheveled Hari clambered in and dropped into a seat.

"Thanks you lot," he grumbled. "You left me out there for a while, didn't you? Do you people realize how cold it is when the wind is blowing like that?"

"Hari?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"You just climbed into the window of a moving train."

"It's not at full speed yet."

"Not the point!"

"Then why did you mention it?"

"I didn't!"

"Where are you going with this?"

"If I had to guess," interjected Blaise, "she's upset that you're complaining about the cold when you just climbed in through the window of a moving train."

"Oh."

"Well?" Hermione prompted.

Hari said nothing.

Tracy nudged Hermione's ribs. "You forgot to ask a question."

"How did you do that?"

Hari cocked his head. "I didn't make her jab you."

Daphne sighed and covered her face with her hands. "Merlin, Morgana, and the Morrigan, my life was so... actually it was pretty

messy before you came into it, now that I consider the matter-Astoria and all-still..."

"Um... Hari?" said Millicent softly.

"Yes?"

"I meant to ask when I saw you over the summer: what's with your eye?"

"What about my eye?"

"It's red."

"Ah. Pink eye."

"Hari?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"It's spinning."

"Oh." He paused. "Magical pink eye."

There was a clatter as five people dove for the door to the compartment. "You have magical pink eye and you're in the room with us?" snarled Pansy from under Millie.

"You mean that's a real thing?"

"Yes!"

"To be fair," said Blaise, who had the advantage of having made it into the corridor. "It doesn't look like magical pink eye."

"You sure?" asked Tracy as she shoved past him and peered over his shoulder.

"Yeah. Magical pink eye makes your eyes glow bright pink and you tend to start talking in polka dots."

"You what?" Hermione's head had snapped around to stare.

"It doesn't look like magical pink eye?" interrupted Hari.

"Nah. No talking in spots."

"Okay. Then I stand by my diagnosis."

"Of course you do," muttered Pansy. "Please refrain from claiming to have highly contagious diseases in the future, please."

"It's not actually deadly," Blaise pointed out. "It's just that it's a pain and it spreads like, well, magical pink eye."

"Speaking of things that clear an area," said Millie, "did you guys hear about Diagon Alley?"

"I don't think anyone missed the news," Daphne said dryly.

"I did," said Hermione.

"Me too, actually." Hari leaned back in a seat.

"Apparently some muggle managed to get into Diagon Alley on her own. Not with a muggleborn or anything."

"Imagine that," commented Hari.

"Yeah. It caused a major fuss. And they took her away to the Department of Mysteries to be experimented on so they can figure out how a muggle managed to get in."

"Oops."

"Oops?"

"Did you make a mistake?" asked Hari in a helpful tone.

"No." Daphne leaned forwards. "You said it and we were wondering... oh no. You did, didn't you?"

"Not sure how to answer that one."

"Hari?"

He turned to face Pansy.

"Did you let a muggle into Diagon Alley?"

"No."

"Liar."

"I didn't!"

"Well, how about something that doesn't involve Hari?" suggested Hermione. "I didn't get all the details because my parents were unwilling to discuss them with me, but apparently the Minister for Foreign Trade was found in a compromising position with... a... why are you grinning like that?"

"Grinning like what?" asked Hari, his face instantly blank.

"You managed to cause a major Minister in Her Majesty's government to resign!"

"I did not!"

"You did."

"Et tu, Blaise?" Hari rose. "Fine then. I can see that I'm not welcome." His nose pointed slightly in the air as he opened the window and climbed out. He poked his head back in. "And he hasn't resigned yet." Then he left.

"He totally did it," said Tracy.

"No kidding," replied Daphne.

"Just hoping that we aren't charged as accessories," added Pansy.

"It's Hari," said Blaise. "He's not going to get charged. He won't even get accused. Except by Professor Snape."

"Yeah, but that doesn't count," commented Millie.

"If he could, Professor Snape would charge him with original sin." Hermione sighed at the confused looks on her friend's faces.

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"Gred?"

"Yes, Gred?"

"I'm going to ask you something strange, brother."

"What is that, brother?"

"Am I hallucinating still?"

"I don't think so. I'm pretty sure we got the duration down to only ten minutes."

"You're sure."

"Pretty much."

"Really?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Because Harry Potter is knocking on our window."

"Come again?"

"Just turn around, Fred."

George turned around and gaped.

"So, I'm not hallucinating?"

"No, Forge."

"Oh good. And bad. Why is Harry Potter outside our window?"

"Good question, George."

"I have a better one, George."

"What's that?"

"Why is he knocking?"

"If I had to guess..."

"Please do."

"He wants to come in."

"You do realize how crazy that sounds, right?"

"Yep."

"What should we do?"

"Well, it would be rude to leave him out in the cold wind." There was a sudden smile on Hari's face and he nodded.

"I guess that settles it, then." George went over and opened the window.

"Hail, lord of chaos!" Fred knelt.

"What can we do for a brother in the art of mania?" asked Fred.

"Eh. Just looking for a place to spend the train ride."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't you have a bunch of friends?"

"Yeah. But they're busy accusing me of things. I feel like Uncle Tobi."

"You're in good company here, then."

"Too true, brother," added Forge. "We get accused of all sorts of things."

"Of course, we usually did them."

"This is true as well."

"But we still get accused of everything."

"You were a boon to us, you know, m'lord."

"Yeah?"

"Indeed. Everyone was trying to watch what you were going to do next. That alone let us get away with scores of pranks."

"I liked when you got Ravenclaws to have bright pink robes for the morning."

"We didn't do that!"

"I saw you."

"Bull!"

"No, really. I didn't recognize the potion you used, but it was clever to add it to the bench instead of the food. They'd have caught on to that

early."

"How?"

"Trade secret."

"Say no more."

The door slid open. Lee Jordan blinked. "Why is Harry Potter in our compartment?"

"He came in through the window."

"I thought you'd fixed that duration problem."

"We did."

"Riiiiiight." Lee looked over at Hari, who was taking up a couple of seats as he stretched out. "You know, there's some kid working his way along the train to find you."

"Is that the little runt who poked his head in a while back?" asked George.

"Yeah. That's the one."

"Why?" Hari sounded genuinely confused.

"Well, to people who haven't spent ten months in a castle with you probably think that you're more interesting than insane."

"Bah."

"No really-"

"I'm not insane. I've grown up with my uncles. Trust me: I know insane."

"Uh..."

"Since we have you here, is there any chance we can enlist your aid in a prank?" asked George.

"Perhaps." Hari's smile showed far too many teeth. "I'd decided I needed to spice life up for those around me."

Fred's smile was equally broad. "Oh good. So we had this idea to..."

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"So what's with the weird horses?" Hari's question caused his friends to jump.

Tracy yelped, then screamed. Her jump had sent her sideways and the impact on the door of the carriage had opened it, letting her tumble onto the ground. A moment later, Hari scooped her up and trotted back to the carriage, holding her out to Millie.

"You dropped this." They stared at him holding out a girl while moving at the same speed as their conveyance, all the while not winded. "But seriously, what's with the weird horses?"

"What horses?"

"The ones pulling the carriage?"

"There's nothing pulling the carriage."

"Actually, Daphne," said Blaise. "There are some creepy skeletal horses there."

"Why didn't you say anything?" asked Hermione.

"Because they're creepy, even to someone who's grown up with magic."

"Maybe they're thestrals?" suggested Hari. "I read descriptions of them, but no one made pictures."

"What are you talking about?"

Hari swung himself into the carriage. "Never mind. Are you guys glad you're not first years?"

"Very much so," said Pansy.

"Be more glad."

"Why?"

"No reason."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm just offering some advice."

"Of course you are."

"Glad you agree."

(A/N John)

This was a fun one. Really, it was. Poor Dobby didn't even get credited with much of the trouble. I expect that he is the cause of one of the biggest breaches of the Statute of Secrecy in decades. Also, come to think of it, poor pedestrians. And poor minister. Oh, and poor muggle being dissected by the DOM.

(A/N 2 John)

I hadn't quite planned all of the mess that happened this chapter. Bits of it, but not all. Certainly, I'm glad to say that Hari has returned to his roots (though not, thankfully, his ROOTs).

And for those of you who are wondering, yes, he just used Kotoamatsukami.

(A/N 3 John)

I should be clear that Hari is mostly going to use it for either situations that are utterly frivolous or ones where he feels that killing is not a good solution. Please feel free to guess how often the latter comes up. And yes, me and Spoon have at least one in mind.

(A/N 4 John)

On the subject of Japanese versus English, I normally use the Japanese names, in no small part because I like how they sound. But in this story, I'm indulging in the apparent fact that the ninja all speak English. Also, some of the translations are really, really cool. (See Shinra Tensei and He With the Ability to Help By All Means)

John Out

Avoid Excessively Stupid Youthfulnesses

Chapter 21: Avoid Excessively Stupid Youthfulnesses

"Welcome, welcome," Dumbledore stood at the head table, smiling broadly. "I'm glad to see most of you once again. There are a few whose transfers I sorely wish I had been given a chance to process. The paperwork was sent to you and everything." He glowered for a moment. "Now on to some important information. Firstly, a warning: in keeping with the best of Hogwarts tradition, no one is to offer help to any First Years. Punishment for doing so will be swift and uncertainly reversible. It depends on the mood of the one issuing the punishment." He pointed to a Hufflepuff. "You'll note that Miss Bennet still has the rabbit ears from two years ago when she decided to offer some advice. That was leniency.

"A further notice: the Hogwarts Express will be leaving early this year. Late fees will be levied against those who trespass." He motioned to Professor McGonagall, who rolled her eyes and rose.

"And now we begin the sorting. I will thank you, Missrs Weasley, to remain *silent* for the duration. Do not make me force the matter." Gred and George mimed zipping and locking their lips. Then they mimed swallow the other's key. Two loud burps echoed. "Thank you." She left the hall.

"While my esteemed deputy is out of the room, I would normally take the chance to issue some kind of instruction of which she would not approve. But I can't be bothered. Instead, let us prepare to greet the new members of our educational institution. Before we do, I will lead us in a short prayer for those of them who will not see the year out." He bowed his head. "Please Merlin, may those who are too stupid to live die early, before we waste education on them. Amen." There was a chorus of answering 'amen's.

Fifteen minutes later, the doors to the Great Hall opened and the small children entered, led by Professor McGonagall. She lined them up and then proceeded to walk the length of the group, levitating them into an actual line with muttered comments about questionable geometry and how in her day people knew a line was straight. The entire horde was bedraggled and dripping on the floor of the Great Hall. McGonagall walked over to the Headmaster and held a whispered conversation to explain to him (and no one else but Hari) that there had been a delay as Hagrid had been forced to guide them in swimming across the lake after all the boats began to toss anyone who used them just far enough from shore that the person would have to tread water.

There were a few incoming students that raised flags to Hari's eyes. The first was a blonde with the most vacant expression he'd ever seen. She seemed to be genuinely mystified by the proceedings. There was also her wand tucked behind her ear. Odd. There was a boy who kept peering around while holding a camera. What was the kid... was that the one that Jordan had mentioned? Huh. And there was a girl with the red hair and freckles that screamed... actually, it just screamed that she had red hair and fair skin and probably, therefore, had family in Scotland or maybe Ireland. Brown eyes, too. Why was it that people seemed to think that red hair and freckles meant Weasley around here? There were at least three other people with red hair and freckles and any number with one or the other. Regardless, what had drawn his attention was the flare of magic from the book she clutched in the pocket of her robe. It was the one the blonde man had deposited into a cauldron in Diagon Alley.

Hari tuned out the Sorting as much as he could while seeing it and reading everyone's lips. It was one of the more frustrating aspects of his life that he often had to focus to avoid focusing on things. Of similar annoyance was the fact that everyone treated this as some sort of sacred activity and so when he prompted them to conversation, they shushed him. It wasn't that he took being shushed as much more than a minor aspect of life, but that conversation could be dull without another participant.

Early in the ceremony was the sorting of the boy-who-would-stalk. His placement in Gryffindor drew shrieks of rage and demands for sorting into Slytherin. The Gryffindors looked as upset about this as the Slytherins looked thrilled ("stupid Mudblood," Malfoy had added. Hari made sure to remember that for later). The blonde Hari had noticed had to be nudged several times to get her to even go be sorted in the first place and once the Hat had shouted its decision, Professor McGonagall had to remove the hat from her head and send the girl on her way with a stinging hex. The girl-who-was-probably-Weasley took a long time to sort and had an expression of stark terror for much of the time that the hat covered everything above her nose. Her eventual placement into the house where every other Weasely had apparently gone since the dawn of time was treated with the same celebration that Hari would have expected from the Second Coming.

"Does anyone know anything about the newbies?" Hari murmured to his friends when the Sorting had finished.

"Nah," replied Daphne. "Minor families, really."

"In other words, not movers and shakers, but not moved and shook," explained Blaise.

"Unless you count Trevor Nevilleson," added Tracy. "He's not a pureblood, but his father has a large share of Nimbus, so he's pretty rich."

"Close enough," said Pansy. She looked at them. "What? Since I've hung out with you guys, I've been noticing things. Rich is more important than blood. Not that people like my parents would admit it."

Professor Dumbledore rose and cleared his throat. Since conversation had only just begun, people were able to hear and shushed each other for almost a minute before realizing that this was the source of the ongoing noise. "Thank you." The twinkle gleamed. "So, as usual, I will be holding back the majority of my announcements until after we have finished our feast, but I feel

compelled to make a few minor starting points primarily designed with the intent of delaying your chance to eat. The first is that..." he trailed off when Professor McGonagall's harrumph echoed through the Hall. "... we should eat. Moron. Blindside. Parallelogram. Parp. Tuck in."

"Is he getting worse?" asked Hari as the food appeared in front of them.

"Eh." Millie shrugged as she began to dish out food to herself and Pansy. "Quit complaining, you're too skinny. To tell the truth, I think he wavers in and out. Our parents seem to think that he's alternately insane and brilliantly devious."

"I just don't like peas!" snapped Pansy, using her spoon to put them on Millie's plate. "Give us the carrots, would you?"

Hari enjoyed his meal with the satisfaction of knowing that he alone would be eating raw fish and rice, followed by a bowl of salty broth with buckwheat noodles and pork in. He'd made a note to bring the local terms for such dishes home. It was certainly faster to use only a couple syllables. It was amusing to see Snape not bothering to glare at him and instead just stare at the empty Slytherin hourglass with a resigned sort of look.

"Oi, Potter!" Hari didn't look up at Malfoy. "What's with that red eye of yours? Poke yourself with your wand?"

Hari opened his mouth.

"Don't you dare," hissed Hermione.

"Magical pink eye?"

"Damn it." Hermione flushed as she realized she'd sworn. And then realized that no one other than her friends had heard, since the entirety of Slytherin other than them had all lunged as far from Hari as they could manage, many of those sitting at the ends of the

benches finding themselves on the floor under a pile of bodies. Malfoy had run screaming to hide behind the Head Table.

"Hari?"

"Yes, Blaise?"

"Is it possible that you could come up with a different lie?"

"I'm not lying."

"Are you going to?"

"No."

"Of course not."

"POTTER!"

"Yes, Professor Snape?" Hari asked of the man screaming from the high table.

"Would you care to explain why I have a pool of urine with Draco Malfoy sitting in it behind my chair?"

"I'm going to assume either you or he have a bladder control problem."

"An interesting diagnosis," snarled the man as the rest of the hall went utterly silent.

"Thank you."

"Perhaps you can offer another suggestion?"

"There's normally a chamber pot behind your seat?"

Snape sighed. "I have been away from you long enough to forget how this goes it seems. We shall skip ahead. Why did you tell

Slytherin House that you have..." he paused, "why did you *lie* and tell Slytherin House that you have magical pink eye?" Snape glared as almost half the student body scrambled further from Slytherin. "Really? Really?" He looked at the Headmaster. The man was surrounded by a healer's specialist protection that created a full-body variant of the bubble-head charm. "Of course."

"I wish to remind everyone that since Mister Potter is not speaking in polka dots, we can be certain that he does not have magical pink eye." Dumbledore's voice was slightly distorted from within his bubble-field. "So please return to your seats and continue with your meals." The Headmaster sat down and spent several minutes working out how to eat through the ward he'd conjured around himself. He looked sad when he realized that the flavor was airborne and had been left outside his protection. He sighed and returned to his now-bland steak.

Hari noticed people all around the hall returning to their meals. He was glad to see that a few people were wondering why Dumbledore was saying it was safe while within the field of a healer's charm used for infectious diseases. Personally, Hari was torn between suspecting mild paranoia and just seeing how many people he could worry.

Daphne was glaring back and forth between Hari and Dumbledore. "How do you do this? Really?"

"Do what?" Hari cocked his head.

"I know after a year, I shouldn't be surprised, but I have a feeling that there will always be moments like this, where I wonder how you can so horribly pervert reality."

"Uh..." Hari looked over at Millicent. "Could you give me a hand here?"

"If I don't miss my guess," said Blaise. "She's wondering why Dumbledore is playing into the paranoia."

"Oh." Hari shrugged. "Got me."

"I don't think she expected you to know, Hari," replied Tracy. "She was just musing on the nature of your presence on normality."

"Huh."

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The food vanished and Dumbledore stood up to speak. "As usual, I have many things to say regarding the start of the year. The first will be to warmly welcome Gilderoy Lockhart to the teaching staff. Sit down, Gilderoy, I did not invite your comments." Lockhart had been halfway to his feet when Dumbledore cut him off. "I will tell you when you are welcome to speak. Here's a hint: not while I'm Headmaster. As I was saying, we welcome Gilderoy Lockhart to the teaching staff as the new Professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Let us all offer a moment of cheer for the foolish soul willing to take the post. I admit that there has been an upward trend, given that unlike his predecessors, Professor Stutterfaces only fled the castle under suspicion of assault on Aurors instead of actually dying. Perhaps that has given this poor idiot hope.

"While I realize that this will sound tired, I must remind all of you that despite its name, the Forbidden Forest is, in fact, *forbidden*. I know that you think that this is an invitation, but anyone who wanders in there had best have supreme confidence, since we will under no circumstances, be bothering to fetch you from whatever you meet in there. On a related note, there have been yet more things added to the forbidden list. Contraband now includes all products from 's'oknoZ' and 'onko'sZay' as well as their parent company: Zonko's. Please also bear in mind that you are not allowed to duel in the corridors. Assaults will be dealt with harshly, but duels will result in lack of medical attention. Please study up on your healing charms before engaging, therefore.

"I'm happy to say that last year continued our trend of a lack of pregnancies during the term. I understand that Miss Garadila is now expecting and I hope that her long-time boyfriend, Mister Damston, is the father, but since the conception was over the summer and-oh dear, I hope that his worry is because she hadn't told him yet and not because of indiscretions. Regardless, I am sure that as entertaining a soap-opera as that will make for your assorted housemates, that you will recall that I am Headmaster and so I get to finish announcements first. Thank you. As I was saying, the only child currently underway in this school is a result of summer break and is not, therefore, considered my problem. I remind all young persons that they are to speak to Madam Pomfrey about contraceptives before indulging in youthful stupidity. Anyone who is detected engaging in excessively stupid youthfulness will find their pictures added to the volume labeled '*idiots in the nuddy*' that is made available to students of appropriate ages.

"I remind First Years that tonight is their one chance to learn a path from their common rooms to the Great Hall. To reiterate my earlier warning: expect no aid in finding classrooms, the entrance hall, the Great Hall, your common rooms, the Black Lake, and, for that matter, which way is down. We at Hogwarts believe that if you should need help finding the ground after jumping from a high place, you deserve whatever happens to you. And that, incidentally, you should publish on how you managed to have that experience. This *is* a place of academia, even if it always seems to just be teaching people how not to hex their own naughty-bits off.

"Now, curfew is in five minutes, off you trot." With that, Dumbledore strode from the room, leaving the students to scramble to get to bed before they could get detentions on the first night.

Hari absently led his friends into a solid bit of wall and then opened a door that was really just a part of the wall faking it and took them down a passage which ended with them walking up three flights of stairs before ending up in front of the entrance to their common room a good five minutes ahead of anyone else. His friends didn't

comment, having gotten used to Hari knowing odd secret passages and using them without any explanation.

"Professor Simon Says Open," Hari called, leading the rest of them inside. "That's not actually the password, but until the Prefects use it, that's the default from the summer," he said. "At least, that's my best guess."

"You have a backdoor pass into the common room?" Hermione sounded like she wished she were shocked.

"Not really. Besides, it only works until the Prefects activate it using the correct password. Speaking of which..."

"Potter!" One of the upper years glared at Hari. "What are you doing in here before us?"

"Chatting with my friends?"

"How did you get in here?"

"The door?"

"And the password?"

"Thanks for reminding me: what's the password?"

"What?"

"That's a strange password."

"Hari?"

"Yes, Daphne?"

"I think he was asking how we got in without the password."

"Oh." Hari turned back to the red-faced Prefect. "None of your business."

"I'm a Prefect!"

"That's nice. I hope it made your mother proud." Hari rose and patted the boy's cheek. "How did they get you to take the job, anyway? Are there any other Prefects? No? Didn't think so." Hari's smile was broader now. "I guess your mother doesn't love you, boy-o. Maybe she wants your sibling to inherit?" He turned back to his friends. "Hermione, I will be assessing your progress tomorrow night. Assuming I find it sufficient, I will be beginning your training, Daphne, the night after."

Hari turned and went upstairs to his bedroom. He wondered if he should have mentioned to someone that the platform had malfunctioned. But they probably had people who kept track of that sort of thing. Oh well. Besides, he had more interesting things to do this night. Someone had decided to wear a target on his chest and Hari wasn't going to let him be disappointed.

(A/N John)

This is one of those chapters I don't have much to say about. Parts of it I think were just sort of padding, but other parts just spiraled out of control.

(A/N 2 John)

For those of you wondering, yes, the prank was that no boat was working for the firsties.

(A/N 3 John)

Also, good news: corpse in the next chapter! You sick freaks.

The Corpse As Promised

Chapter 22: The Corpse. As Promised.

"Potter!"

"Good..." Hari paused a moment, "... morning, Professor Snape." Hari was sitting cross-legged on his bed, single visible eye bright and alert inasmuch as could be told when it kept spinning. "Might I ask to what I owe the unexpected pleasure of your company?"

It was just shy of three in the morning and Professor Snape had nearly kicked in the door. Even now, he was glaring at Hari with a newfound venom. "Janus Ingsanson is dead."

"Who?"

"The Slytherin Prefect."

"Oh. Him."

"Yes, him. Now up you get!"

"Why?" Hari asked as he rose and headed out the door.

"Because I have a dead student-a dead Prefect!"

"I'm not sure what that has to do with me," Hari replied mildly as he led the way out of the Common Room.

"Really? Not the slightest hint of an idea?"

"Not at all, Professor Snape."

"So it isn't, for example, involved with you because you killed him?"

"What isn't?"

And so it went, for several flights of stairs. At the gargoyle, Snape glared at it for a moment. "I told the Headmaster to expect me. Don't jerk me about." The gargoyle failed to respond. "I'm not going to guess."

Silence.

"Not happening."

Silence again.

"Open up."

"As fun as this is, Professor Snape, is there any chance that we can get to the purpose of this visit?" The gargoyle stepped aside.

"Really?" Snape glared at the gargoyle. "I don't believe you for a minute that was the password."

Silence.

"Are you coming, Professor Snape?" came Hari's voice from up the winding stairs.

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"Good morning, Mister Potter, Severus."

"Headmaster, Potter killed my Prefect!"

"I did?"

"Shut up, Potter." Snape stopped glaring at Hari to glare at Dumbledore, who seemed to be enjoying the search through a giant pile of sweets for something in particular. "Well?"

"I'm sorry, Severus, is there any evidence this time?"

"No."

"Then I'm not sure what you expect me to-ah! A boiled humbug! Lovely." Dumbledore held up the candy with glee. "What were we talking about, Severus?"

"If it's any consolation, he wasn't much of a Prefect, Professor."

"It's not. And what do you mean by that?"

"Well, last night, he asked me how I got into the Common Room. I mean, we were both in it at the time, so I'm not clear why he wasn't sure about how to enter and he never even told me the password."

"That was why you killed him?"

"Did I say I killed him?"

"I'm pretending you said yes and moved on to my next question, Potter. I'm not going to spend my time asking just the first question on the list all year."

"As you like. You can pretend I said 'no', also."

"What was your pretend reason?"

"You may imagine that I answered that 'he was asking for it', if you wish."

"Funny thing, the presumed-late Mister Yaxley said the same thing last year. I rather expect he was saved the rest of his punishment by his untimely presumed-death."

"Ah yes," added Dumbledore. "Poor boy. I sent a letter to his parents advising that they complain to whoever taught him English. He seemed to have reversed 'yes' and 'no'." There was a steely glint in his eyes. "I do expect that if he hadn't vanished to his presumed-timely end, that he would have suffered all manner of interesting afflictions; I feel certain that someone would have ensured that he

got the rest of the language as mixed up, just to keep it neat, of course." The twinkle was back. "But why speak ill of the presumed-dead?"

"Why indeed," Hari replied solemnly.

"Setting that aside, Headmaster, I wish to lodge my complaint."

"I'm sorry?" Dumbledore's head cocked. "Your complaint wasn't that you believe Mister Potter to have murdered a student?"

"After your reaction last year? Hardly."

"Oh. Then what *is* the problem?"

"I'm going to have to write the 'Dear Sir and/or Madam' letter before dawn!" Snape whirled to snarl at Hari. "You couldn't have waited a week? What was so pressing that it couldn't wait until classes had started, hm?"

"Well—" Hari began, before Snape cut him off.

"In a week, I would have finished the letter during my spare time!"

"Umm..." Hari tried.

"It's not like I didn't expect him to die! Stupid boy like that as Prefect? He was bound to annoy you sooner or later. But his parents complained and there weren't any other takers. Not in all three upper years, Potter! Only one student was fool enough to take the badge in Slytherin!"

"Er..."

"But I had to be woken at two in the morning by a frantic House Elf who'd had the misfortune of discovering the body first. Do you realize how much sobbing I had to listen to over how she'd had to report it and so someone else was going to get to deal with the

mess? It took twenty minutes to get her to shut up! And if I have to be awake, you get to be awake, remember, Potter?"

"So that's why it couldn't wait until morning."

"What? No! Just because if I don't get the formal letter there before some idiot firstly notices he's missing, then I'll get a second howler over not informing them promptly!" Snape paused. "On an unrelated note, Potter, the next time you messily execute someone, please call for Genni. I had to promise the blasted thing that she'd get the next corpse before she'd leave."

"Of course not, Professor."

"Damn it, Potter! Do *not* make me have to deal with another incident of hysterical House Elf!"

"But if I come across any corpses in the corpse-erm, course-of my wanderings instead of attending class and so on, I'll be sure to give her a call."

"Thank you." Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "The first damn night."

"Think of it this way, Professor Snape: imagine how much more trouble he'd have made for you if he'd survived."

Snape brightened up a bit. "You know, that's a fair point. He'd probably have... killed... a... stude- hmm... I'm not sure how this is better. Oh, blast! Headmaster?"

"Yes, Severus?" asked a Dumbledore who was evidently hiding a smile. Poorly, given that his beard was twitching.

"Can you let me borrow a Prefect or two? I need... actually, now that I think of it, he'd done the only thing he was supposed to. Any other discipline problems will probably be... sorted out, Mister Potter. So I think we'll leave it at that. And in the future, Potter?"

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"Could you please try to either make it a disappearance or something obviously school-related? I don't need to explain to a half-dozen parents about the actual murders going on in the school again. And, come to think of it, please keep it to during the day, after mid-night and before breakfast is *not* the time I want to be dealing with this kind of mess."

"Let's imagine I said 'I'll see what I can do'."

"I'll take what I can get."

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The red envelope was smoking as Professor Snape glared at it.

"A howler?" asked Blaise. "What on earth for? It's not even a full day gone yet."

"If I had to guess," said Hari.

"You don't." Hermione's response was curt. "Guessing is for when you don't actually know."

"I'd say it's because he sent a letter to that Prefect's parents, informing them that their son died in a tragic accident."

"Died?" asked Hermione.

"Accident?" asked Pansy.

Hari looked at the now flaming letter. "To judge from the fire, I would say that he was... drawn, quartered, impaled, gutted, exsanguinated, and hung by his own intestines in an unused dungeon."

"Sounds more like natural causes, to me," said Blaise.

"Oh, and he'd jumped up and down on a bed of nails he'd dragged from some nearby antique castle."

"Definitely natural causes, then."

"Natural?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah. Coroner ruled and everything."

Professor Snape had picked up the now-ablaze post and carried it sedately from his seat and out the door. There was some screeching barely audible through the wood. It was a door marked 'Howler'. The staff had taken the idea of a bunker and applied it to angry letters.

"Good morning, students!" Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet. "I want to welcome all of you to your first day back. In honor of the death of one of the students, we will be beginning classes today, as he would no doubt have wished. Given that change, I should mention-Gilderoy, sit down and shut up. I'm Headmaster. That means I get first refusal when it comes to student-attention and talking-time-that we are rather strict about punctuality here at Hogwarts. Our motto about tickling and dragons is most apt, given that our policy on tardiness is often called 'draconian'-and no, Mister Malfoy, that is not a reference to you. Please stop preening-and I must therefore inform you that being late to a first class of the year will be punished by whatever devious means your professors can devise.

"If nothing else, I expect that detention will only be the start of it. You who are First Years will surely be hated for your whole time here and suffer for it in whatever manner is deemed sufficient. I don't *think* any Professor has used the thumbscrews since the beginning of my tenure, so take heart in that, at least. On the other hand, it is remarkable, isn't it, Miss Wade, how much someone's grades can be harmed if the Professor is inclined to grade one badly? Did you manage a single A or up last year? Not good, going into your NEWTs, is it? Oh buck up, your examiners won't hate you. Probably. All you need worry about is that your Professors will sabotage your

learning experience during your preparation for the most important test you'll ever take. What's to worry about?

"Back to my point about punctuality. Your schedules were delivered to your dorm rooms five minutes ago by House Elves to save your heads of house the trouble. Best to fetch them, since classes started a half hour ago."

"It's worse than last year," Millicent muttered. She turned. "Where's Hari?"

X

X

"You know," said Hermione as they walked down a secret passage Hari had shown the group a while back. They saw no point in running when their teachers were still eating breakfast. There had been a certain amount of upset at the head table since the Professors had apparently been unaware of the new schedule.
"There's something that's been bothering me."

"Yeah?" Blaise had taken the lead.

"Why was Fawkes transporting Hari? I mean, he just appeared on a muggle beach and everything!"

"I have no idea," replied Pansy. "I mean, when he left my house, he was being carried by a baby phoenix."

"I don't think he liked it very much," added Millicent. "I mean, he glared at it a lot when it was at my house. You know my mother is *still* gushing-"

"Because he has a baby phoenix?" asked Daphne.

"What? No. Because he hit her so hard she bounced off the ceiling." Millie rolled her eyes. "I swear she's already started planning the wedding."

"Come again?"

"She thinks he's the most darling boy she's ever met. It doesn't help that he sent brass knuckles for Christmas."

"Not helping, here."

"Apparently he's 'thoughtful'." Millicent paused. "Actually, he *did* notice that I often wish I had a set of them to hit people with, so... but still..."

"Because he hit her?"

"Well yes."

"Really?" Pansy's voice was full of confusion more than anything.

"Yep. It's funny. She never hits my dad."

"And that's remarkable?" Hermione sounded worried.

"For my mum?" Millicent raised an eyebrow. "She used to hit everyone . But daddy never gets hit."

"Because he dodges?" Tracy asked. "Sorry, sorry. I've been around Hari too much."

"What? No! She just doesn't even try. He's the only one. The milk-elf doesn't deliver in the mornings; he waits for her to go out for a walk."

"You know," said Daphne. "That raises a question."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Where's the phoenix now?"

X

X

"Itachi?"

"Yes, Leader-sama?" Itachi turned from where he'd been staring out a window of the tower. "Is something bothering you?"

"Now that you mention it, yes."

Itachi was silent.

"You see, I was just wandering through my tower and I saw something odd. I would have discounted it as just a trick of my incredibly powerful eyes, but I've been seeing this for some time and I decided I would try and work out the cause."

"Did you ask Tobi?"

"Normally, I would. In this case, I happen to suspect that you might be more helpful in sorting this matter out." Pein motioned. "Follow me."

As the two walked through the Tower, Pein asked, "how is Hari?"

"As far as I know? He's fine."

"That's good."

"Hn."

"So, if you'll just step in here, Itachi, could you explain this?"

"Explain what, Leader-sama?"

"Well, it's just that there appears to be a small, red bird sitting on my desk."

"Indeed, there does, Leader-sama."

"The thing is, I rather like being able to use my desk and when I try to, my papers catch fire."

"How remarkable."

"You see, this is something that does not quite feel like a prank, Itachi. It feels rather more like something that wasn't really thought through that has ended up in my sphere of influence through no fault of my own. I admit that I discount allowing you to keep your son."

Itachi didn't reply.

"So, I'm hoping you might explain what this bird is doing here."

"Not the slightest clue, Leader-sama."

"No?"

"Well, a little one, perhaps."

"Please, go on."

"Well, it started popping up in my room about two weeks ago."

"A slight clue indeed."

"And I'm not really sure what it's doing here. I think it's the same species as the bird that me, my son, and Kisame killed very thoroughly when he first got that odd letter. It seemed to mildly annoy it."

"Really?"

"Really. And anyway, I don't know why it seemed to just spend its time in my room. So I told it to find somewhere comfortable to relax."

"I see."

"Apparently, it chose your desk."

"So I gathered."

"But I'm not sure why."

"Which doesn't help in the slightest."

"No."

"Thank you. So, make it go away."

"Umm..." Itachi walked over to the bird. "Could you move, please? My boss would like his desk back."

The bird nodded.

"Please move."

The bird nodded.

"Itachi?"

"Yes, Leader-sama?"

"Why do I get the feeling your son is at the heart of this?"

"Because you are wise, Leader-sama?"

(A/N John)

I promised a corpse and I feel I delivered. I enjoyed the idea that Snape has pretty much come to accept that there will be killings that aren't as neat as the usual jockeying for power in his house. And that his complaint is that the House Elf was hysterical.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, I realized, along with Spoon, that the Phoenix needed to be somewhere. And it struck me that this was probably going to

make Pein's life more difficult as a result. Poor man can't use his desk.

(A/N 3 John)

Insanity will be growing shortly. And yes, I am aware how bad that sounds.

That Was Unexpected

Chapter 23: That Was Unexpected

"Welcome back class," began Professor McGonagall. "And Mister Potter. So nice of you to join us today."

"Least I could do, Professor."

"Today we will be doing a bit of review to make sure everyone did their homework." She closed her eyes. "No doubt most of you failed to open a book, let alone do any assignments. Let us see how badly your skills have degraded, shall we?"

As McGonagall went around the room, she didn't bother stopping at Hari's desk, where there was a set of example transfigurations for the homework already resting by his feet. Which were, as usual, on the desk. It was disconcerting for her to see one of his eyes, even though it was closed.

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Blaise?"

"I'm having a bit of trouble with this one."

"Yes?"

"I'm getting the wand movement wrong, right?"

"Correct."

"Can you help?"

"Not really?"

"Why not?"

"I'm busy." Hermione glared at the matchstick on her desk which was rapidly turning silvery.

"Weren't you managing to do this just fine last year?"

"Yeah. But I'm a bit out of practice."

"Really?"

"Yeah, no magic over the summer, remember?"

"And?"

"What do you mean, 'and'?"

"Weren't you in France?"

"Yes."

"So, why didn't you practice?"

"I'm missing something here."

"Well, they track magic by location, don't they?"

"By location?"

"Yeah. Why do you think purebloods and even halfbloods can use magic over the summer? They can only track if magic is being used in an area. So if you're not at your home..."

"That's horribly unfair!"

"Miss Granger!" Professor McGonagall was suddenly beside the two of them. "I am most disappointed to see you've let your skills slip. You will be spending evenings with me doing remedial transfiguration until this is remedied."

"But..."

"No excuses."

"Yes, Professor."

"You could always just ignore it, Hermione."

"Hari?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Shut up."

X

X

"I am impressed." Snape's voice was dry. "Most of you remembered to shut up when I enter the room. Mister Weasley, I'm happy to discover, did not learn his lesson. Fifteen points from Gryffindor for being stupider than usual." He waved his wand at the board and a recipe shimmered into view. "Can anyone tell me what this will make? Not you, Miss Granger-as much as I would like to give my house points, I'm genuinely curious if anyone else knows the answer."

Hermione lowered her hand with a mixture of pleasure at the compliment and an expression that suggested she'd just been kicked. Blaise patted her on the shoulder absently.

"Anyone? Mister Potter?"

"I'm sorry, Professor, I can't think of anything that it would make. It looks rather like a Dimness Draught, but some of the instructions are wrong."

"Twenty points to Slytherin." Hari's eyes snapped open. "It would make nothing at all. Well, it would make a horrendous mess in a cauldron and would waste some expensive ingredients, but no potion comes of this particular set of instructions. If, however, you

added the mandrake root *after* the three clockwise turns, you would get one of the more annoying potions ever devised. It serves no real purpose beyond pranks and sabotage. Miss Granger, would you care to give us a description of its effects?"

"In essence, the Dimness Draught is a concentrated curse of excessive stupidity. Ingested, it will take approximately two hours to trigger, depending on the victim, after which time it will render the person an absolute nitwit. There is a high chance of sudden blithering and other outward signs of stupidity. Outside of being one of the most commonly used prank-potions, it is normally used for sabotage or exceptionally cruel jokes on people who are about to make important speeches."

"Correct. I have no doubt that Mister Weasley is familiar with this potion... since his elder brothers brew it at every opportunity for their juvenile 'japes'." The word came out as though it were dirty. "Do they feed you potions often, Mister Weasley?"

"Uh... yes?"

"Oh good."

"Good?"

"Yes. I rather hope it explains your idiocy and that if I give you some Purging Broth, you will be free of the aftereffects of repeated exposure and might have a chance at being intelligent. Incidentally, it will leave you in Hospital for a week."

"Uh..."

"That's my good deed for the year," Snape went on. "So," he waved his wand and a new recipe appeared. "And please, don't anyone just assume that this one is also a trick. And again, miss Granger, please let someone else have a chance."

Hari lazily raised a foot into the air.

"Perhaps someone other than Mister Potter as well?"

The foot stayed in place.

"Mister Thomas, would you care to tell me what this should make?"

"Er..."

"No? Ten points from Gryffindor. Miss Patil, your twin would no doubt know-do you?"

She shook her head.

"Another ten points then. Just for the sake of a third go, Mister Longbottom?"

"Um... um..."

"And ten mo-"

"I-it m-makes S-sun-b-block Solu-ution."

Snape blinked. Then he blinked again. Then he turned and stared at the board for almost a minute. He began to mutter to himself. Finally, he spoke loud enough to be heard, "Ten points to G-G-G-Gryffindor." He rubbed his face. "Just to help my grasp of reality when Mister Potter doesn't appear to be involved, could you tell me *how* you know?"

"H-herbology?"

"How is that connected?"

"I m-m-make it, so I d-d-don't g-get sunburn."

"You *make* a potion?"

"Y-yes?"

Snape whirled. "THEN WHY DON'T YOU MAKE THEM HERE?"

"Uh..."

"Everyone else, brew a potion from last year. Mister Longbottom, come here."

Neville's walk to the front of the classroom was rather like that of a man headed to the gallows. "Mister Longbottom, you will brew Sunblock Solution today. Off you go."

X

X

Snape turned to prowl along the aisles, checking people's work. "Mister Potter."

"Yes, Professor?" Hari didn't look up, and was carefully stirring the potion using his teeth to hold the spoon as he added beeswax soaked in milk (of a cow).

"What are you making?"

"If I add this horn? Bomb Balm."

"I did say to make a potion from last year."

"Sixth Years were making it last year."

"Of course."

"That was close," Hari said as he suddenly started stirring the opposite direction.

"What was close?"

"The potion would have exploded if I had continued to stir that way."

"I'm not even going to ask how you know that." Snape sighed. "But please refrain from making potions that are *intended* to explode in my classroom. In the future," he added. "If I vanish it now, I don't think any of us would be here to realize."

X

X

"Mister Longbottom?"

"Y-y-yes, P-prof-fessor?"

"How is it that when I ask you to make the simplest potion I know of, you manage to melt the cauldron in a most impressive display of destruction, but when I have you brew Sunblock Solution, something that is known to set off sunbursts when mixed incorrectly-and incidentally killing everyone in the area-you manage to do it perfectly?"

"Uh..."

"Let me put it differently: you will be brewing more reliably by the end of this year. I will be seeing you after dinner tonight." He sighed. Being randomly mean was fun, but there might be hope for a potions specialist-for that, he was willing to be a bit kinder. "No, it's not technically a detention. You just have to come here and can't leave until I tell you. See? Not a detention."

Snape looked over the pair of melted cauldrons and half-dozen incomplete potions in vials along with the other work turned in.

"Mister Potter?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Leave the potion in the cauldron."

"Professor?"

"All of it. You cause me enough trouble without a full cauldron's worth of Bomb Balm."

Hari grumbled and then walked out of the classroom.

"An excellent idea. The rest of you, get out."

X

X

"What's troubling you, Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall asked when Hermione entered her office that evening. The girl was seething and shuddering at the same time. One eye was twitching and her distressingly pointed teeth were bared in rage.

"Nothing," Hermione growled. There was a bruise forming on her cheek and every time her twitch caused it to twinge, she flinched again. Hari had taken it upon himself to reinforce the lesson before she went to her remedial lessons with McGonagall. He'd done that by beating her around the head with her wand for almost an hour. By the time she'd left, she was furious. "Why would you think there's anything wrong?" she jabbed a finger at a matchstick on McGonagall's desk, which turned into a needle as though jump-cut.

"I can't imagine," muttered Professor McGonagall as Hermione's finger flicked at a mouse that had been stuck to her desk and it was replaced with a rather rough teacup. And saucer. "I notice your finesse seems to be lacking."

Hermione snarled wordlessly as she pointed at a tortoise, turning it into a teapot with ornate scrollwork in the iron and gold inlays along the spout. And it was partly surrounded by a teacozy. It had the Hogwarts crest monogrammed onto it.

"Ah. Yes."

X

X

"How'd it go?" Hari asked Hermione.

"I hate you!"

"It went well then?"

"I. Hate. You."

"That good?"

"HATE YOU!"

"She let you out of the rest of the remedial classes, didn't she?"

"Yes."

Hari turned to the rest of their friends. "See? I told you guys that she'd be fine."

"That wasn't why we've been sitting up, Hari," replied Daphne.

"No?"

"We wanted you to explain why you were beating up our friend with her own wand."

"More importantly," added Blaise, "why was it upsetting her so much?"

"I was making sure she was properly motivated," replied Hari calmly. He backflipped and landed, standing on the back of an armchair. The book Hermione had thrown sailed through the group and hammered Draco Malfoy into Crabbe. "You know, I'm rather starting to think you're actually aiming at him." Hari mused as Crabbe slung the unconscious boy over a burly shoulder and carried Draco from the room, a trail of blood soaking its way down Crabbe's back.

Hermione gaped at the scene. "After a year, I should really be used to this house's attitude towards casual violence, but..."

"To tell the truth, I think there'd be more outcry if it weren't Draco," said Tracy.

Pansy laughed harshly. "Everyone's so used to him getting beat by Hermione when she's not even aiming for him that no one comments. Oh, spoke too soon."

Goyle had trotted up to the group. He held out the book to Hermione. "I think Draco found this for you."

"Uh..." Hermione took the book. "Thanks?"

"No problem." Goyle lumbered off.

"Did that just happen?" asked Blaise.

"I'm blaming Hari," replied Daphne.

"Wait, what?" Hari cried. "Why?"

"It happened to someone you're close friends with. It's *always* you."

"Speaking of it being me," Hari said brightly. "Tomorrow night, I expect you to be down here to begin your lessons." So saying, Hari got up. "I think I'll go to bed," he lied. Everyone knew it was a lie, too, since he proceeded to walk out of the common room into the corridor outside.

"I'm not sure I want to know what he's up to," Tracy muttered.

"If it's important, it'll probably be in the paper," said Pansy.

"Daphne?" began Hermione.

"What?"

"You know, I really, really think you should make sure to be down here on time."

"Why?"

"You've known Hari as long as me, right?"

"Give or take."

"And you've noticed how he does things?"

"Meaning?"

"How it's never a half-measure?"

"Yeah?"

"And how he doesn't really make threats?"

"Yes."

"And..." Hermione paused. "Never mind." It would be nice to see someone else suffer from Hari's brand of insanity for once. "It's nothing."

X

X

Hari decided that since his morning was theoretically supposed to be occupied by double History, that he would do something productive. He'd considered just sleeping, which would have qualified, but instead opted for more practical uses of his time.

"Mister Potter." Professor McGonagall's voice was icy.

"Goodmorning, Professor." Hari's cheerful reply somehow managed to draw a deep frown onto an already stony face.

"Why are you in my rooms?"

"Well, originally, it was just because I'd decided to skip nap-time," Hari said. "But I thought I would ask a few questions about this year's Transfiguration class."

"Oh?" McGonagall raised one eyebrow, her face otherwise a mask of detached anger.

"Well, I understand the application of last year's lessons to the first half of what we're going to learn," Hari began. "The general overview of the various types of Transfigurations and all that. What I don't understand is why we're just scaling up."

"Come again?"

"We're just going to do the same basic things on larger or smaller things. Why aren't we learning multiple targets at once? Or how to work the spells on humans? Just the teacup spell would be incredibly useful if we could apply it to, say, a human lung."

"Mister Potter..." Professor McGonagall took a slow breath. "I was not planning to teach my students combat magic. Killing is a serious matter."

"Eh." Hari shrugged. He rose. "I'll just have to do more self-study. Not a problem. I do expect I'll miss some of your classes." He waved and opened the locked door to her private quarters, walking out into the restricted wing of the school. "I'll see you at lunch, Professor."

McGonagall sighed and closed her eyes. She'd been planning to enjoy a nice morning in, maybe balance the accounts. For some reason, she was looking forward to some idiotic crisis that would let her not think about what had just happened. Why was a twelve-year-old asking about combat magic, anyway? Severus's thoughts were clearly affecting her.

X

X

"Daphne?"

"Yes, Hari?"

Hari didn't look up from his bowl of ramen (he was so glad there was a shorter name for it). "Be in the Common Room at eleven tonight."

Daphne's eyebrow rose. "And if I'm not?"

"I shall be forced to employ drastic measures."

Her other eyebrow made its ascent. "Measures like?"

"Drastic ones."

Daphne scoffed and went back to her dinner. Hari shrugged to himself.

X

X

Hermione had gratefully gone to sleep. Apparently, her performance in class today had convinced Hari that she wasn't as far behind as he'd feared. So instead, he was giving Daphne ten more minutes in which to be even later. It would seem that she had not taken his words to heart.

Oh well. Hari smiled broadly. Drastic measures it was.

X

X

"DAPHNEDAPHNEDAPHNE!"

(A/N John)

Blame Spoon. Not for the chapter, much of it is my doing, but the delay has been because she was sick and it was cold. We therefore didn't see each other for the better part of a week (I'm currently being snuggled viciously) and without writing, we didn't publish.

(A/N 2 John)

Three guesses who that is at the end. And I'm taking away the second and fourth chance.

(A/N 3 John)

And negative five points each time you don't guess Girl-Tobi

(A/N 4 John)

You can blame Spoon for that A/N

(A/N Spoon)

I was framed

(A/N 5 John)

As I was saying... This chapter has laid the groundwork for several subplots that I had in no way planned until they sort of fell into my lap. Now they're going to get used. Viciously.

Drastic Measures

Chapter 24: Drastic Measures

Daphne's eyes snapped open, staring at the ceiling in blank horror. She turned her head slightly and was confronted by the sight of her sister's face right next to hers. Blue eyes met blue eyes. "No, no, no nononononono." Daphne's hands frantically rubbed at her face. Then she looked down and saw she was dressed in her night clothes. She sighed and lay back down. "Just a dream."

She sat upright instantly when the bucket of icewater was dumped on her head. "NOT A DREAM!" She paused for a moment to process. There was something terribly wrong with the world. After a few seconds, the knut dropped. "Astoria?"

"HI DAPHNE!" The blonde ball of energy was bouncing up and down, holding the empty bucket.

"Astoria?"

"Daphne?" Her sister sounded less sure.

Daphne looked around. "I'm still at Hogwarts. Good." She looked at her sibling. "And not so good. Astoria..."

"Yes, Daphne?"

"We are at Hogwarts, right?"

"Yes, Daphne."

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

Astoria didn't even flinch. "Hari brought me!"

"He *what* ? Why?"

"Drastic measures."

Daphne screamed as she whirled to find Hari lying on her bed, back to the wall. There were a few confused seconds as she tumbled to the floor, soaking wet in a tangle of sheets and bedding. The damndest thing was that Hari was lying in the same position when she looked up, despite the covers having been pulled half-off the bed.

"I told you that I would take steps." He turned to Astoira. "Great news, Girl-Tobi! I'm going to teach you proper magic!"

Astoria made a sound remarkably like "squeee!"

"Hari!" Snapped Daphne. "She's ten!"

"And you're also going to help motivate your sister," Hari continued. "Whenever you manage a spell first, I'm going to give you a biiiiiig bowl of pudding and then help you break into her room at night."

"Squeee!"

"Hari!"

"Yes, Daphne?"

"She can't be here. She's ten."

Hari looked at Astoria, then down at the ground, then at the walls, then at Astoria, then down, then at the door. "You're sure?"

"Yes!"

"Because she seems to be here."

"That's not what I meant." Daphne struggled to her feet, wrestling her way free of her damp sheets. "Hogwarts starts at eleven. She just turned ten."

"And if you don't want to be tormented all night," Hari said, resuming his earlier line of thought. "You'll get the spell first."

"She doesn't even have a wand!"

"How is that a problem?" Hari put an arm around Astoria's shoulders and began walking to the door. "Come on, Girl-Tobi, let's get you settled down for the night with Hermione."

Daphne glared at her bed and wished that the House Elves would show up. From outside her door, she heard shrieks and someone shouting that Hari couldn't be in the girl's wing. Then some more shrieking and silence. It was about then that she noticed her wand wasn't on her nightstand.

X

X

"-you really can't do this, you know," Hermione hissed as the group entered the Great Hall. Astoria was eagerly looking around with a giant smile on her face. "I mean, bad enough you shoved someone into my bed with me to spend the night, but you're telling me you're just going to keep her here?"

"Yes."

"And her parents were okay with this?" asked Blaise, absently.

"Come again?"

"When you asked them to do this, her parents were really okay with you bringing their daughter to Hogwarts?"

"I think I'm missing something here."

Blaise sighed. "*Did* you ask her parents?"

"Ask them what?"

"Of course not," muttered Pansy.

"He didn't even ask me!" chirped Astoria. "He just grabbed me out of my bed and said 'you're coming to Hogwarts; hold on tight.'"

Tracy was busy rubbing her friend's shoulder. Daphne had her head in her hands and was quietly cursing.

"This is going to be an interesting morning," said Millicent.

"And how is that different from every morning?" grumbled Pansy.

"How did I end up getting sucked into this?"

"Good morning, Mister Potter," called Dumbledore from the head table. "Might I inquire whom that young lady is with you? The one not at dinner with us last night," he finished hurriedly.

"This is Girl-Tobi. She's an early transfer student."

"Dear Merlin," whimpered Daphne.

"Oh. Fascinating. We've never had one of those before. Professor McGonagall?" Minerva had buried her face behind her hands and was already sniffling sadly. "Would you please get the Hat. We need to sort this young lady." Minerva nodded silently and rose, a tear running down her cheek as she left the Hall.

"You can sit with us," sighed Hermione. She sat down and watched as Astoria began to pile a plate high with pancakes and then smothered them in syrup until it ran off the plate and onto the table.
"You know that's really bad for your teeth."

"And my sanity," Daphne ground out.

The chatter around the hall was pretty much all about the girl Hari had somehow brought to the school. Professor McGonagall emerged into the hall with a rickety stool and a tattered hat that somehow contrived to look peeved. She took a long breath.

"No-Family-Name, Girl-Tobi!" she called.

Astoria hopped up and skipped towards the front of the hall, paused, ran back to the table and shoveled the rest of her pancakes into her mouth and ran back up, mouth bulging and syrup running down her face. She grabbed the hat and didn't even get to jam it onto her head before the brim opened.

"Gryffindor! Now let me go back to sleep! But get this syrup off me first!"

There were muted cheers from the table that had a new student. There was too much confusion to be properly celebratory. And that didn't take into account that she was clearly friendly with Slytherins. On the other hand, she was friendly with Hari Potter's Slytherins, and that probably meant she was more crazy than evil.

Astoria sat down at an open seat and went to work grabbing pastries and gobbling them.

"Is it just me," muttered Gred.

"Or is this just like watching Ronald?" finished George.

"Indeed."

"Sort of, but she does keep her mouth closed."

"True, true, brother."

One of them leaned out and shouted down the table. "Oi! Firsty! How'd you end up at Hogwarts two days late?"

Astoria swallowed a mouthful of scone. "Hari kidnapped me!" She grinned. "He wanted me to torment my sister!"

The twins looked at each other. Their smiles threatened to remove the tops of their heads. As one (shocking absolutely no one), they

rose and swooped in on either side of Astoira, shoving students to the side. ('Ow!' called Percy as he fell off the edge of the bench)

"Greetings, Girl-Tobi," began one.

"Emissary of the great lord of Chaos," said the other.

"I didn't know he had a title," commented Astoira as she looked around, trying to see if there were more sweets in reach. She frowned when she discovered that the food had been dismissed.

"Oi, Gin!" yelled Forge.

"Do us a favor," said George. "Make sure Girl-Tobi gets to her classes?"

Ginny shrugged. "Alright?" She glared a bit at Astoria. "Is your name really 'Girl-Tobi'?"

Astoria poked despondently at her plate. "Not really, Hari just calls me tha-"

"Come on, Girl-Tobi," Hari said. Most of the table jumped as he set a hand on Astoria's shoulder. "Let's get you to..." he paused for a moment. "Transfiguration."

"Hey!" called Angelina Johnson. "You're not allowed to help Firsties!"

"She's ten," replied Hari. "She's just an advanced-placement student."

"What?"

Hari ignored Angelina and walked with Astoria out of the hall. "So, if we turn here..." Astoria didn't squeak as they walked into an apparently solid piece of floor and vanished downwards.

X

X

"Mister Potter?" asked Professor McGonagall

"Yes, Professor?"

"What are you doing in my class?"

"Um... Helping? Hari turned back to Astoria. "Now, Girl-Tobi, your teachers are going to lie to you."

"Ahem!"

"They will tell you that you need a wand and that you'll need to wave it properly and say silly words," as Hari spoke, the matchstick on her desk was constantly turning into a silvery needle and back. "They are most perfidious lies." Girl-Tobi nodded. "So today, just ignore your teachers. I'll teach you tonight." Hari rose and patted Astoria's blonde hair. "Good. See you this afternoon, Professor McGonagall." Hari waved and trotted out of the classroom, ignoring the issuance of detention.

X

X

"Hello, Mister Potter." Professor Flitwick looked up from leading the review of the previous year. "Ten points to Slytherin for remembering everything from last year."

Hermione's eyes narrowed for a moment and she paused in her levitation of a rock (which was moving around in a circle to Flitwick's evident delight) and began to bang her head on the desk in front of her. After three strikes, she looked up and sighed. "I really wish I were surprised by this."

"Quit complaining," muttered Daphne. She was staring at a rock in front of her which Hermione had provided and was failing to get it to move.

"Besides," added Blaise, "you already got fifteen for remembering how to move an object despite it not being something we covered at all."

Hari sat down in an open seat beside Daphne and leaned out of the way of her attempt to hit him in the face with her Charms book. After a moment she began to growl when Hari's chair began to orbit her desk. With Hari in it.

"Was it really necessary that your desk stay in front of you?" she snapped.

"Yes?" Hari waved to Flitwick when the tiny man came over to take a closer look.

"Impressive, Mister Potter." The man scrambled to grab his pointed hat when Hari's desk knocked it to the floor, whizzing over his head.

X

X

"Hari?"

"Yes, Daphne?"

"What is my sister doing here?"

"Learning?"

"This is the Slytherin Common Room."

"And?"

"And it's long after curfew."

Hari stared at Daphne blankly as Girl-Tobi frowned in concentration at the pebble in front of her. He turned back to Astoria. "Go on, Girl-

Tobi. The trick is to... hmm... I guess feel the magic." He paused. "I know!" He trotted out of the Common Room and into the girl's wing.

There was a screech and then Hari came back, tugging Hermione in her bedclothes. "I need you to teach Girl-Tobi how to cast the levitation spell."

Hermione tried to glare, but was hindered by yawning and rubbing her eyes. "Run that by me again?"

Hari pulled Daphne's wand out of his pocket and held it out to Astoria. "Hold this, Girl-Tobi." Her turned. "Hermione, I need you to teach it to her. How to do it with a wand." When Hermione's mouth opened, Hari continued, "glad you agree to do it. Chop chop."

Hermione sighed.

(A/N John)

I have to admit that at least portions of this chapter were absolutely hilarious to write. Sadly, the best part for me was probably the omake. It had been pointed out to me that Pein would probably like to know why no one mentioned a major attack by his personnel on the Village Hidden in the Leaves.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, I want to be prompt about this:

WARNING: THIS FIC CONTAINS PARODY AND SLAPSTICK HUMOR. READ AT YOUR OWN RISK.

(A/N 3 John)

THANK YOU

Omake

About One Month Ago

"Itachi?"

Itachi looked up from reading through intelligence reports. Sadly, they weren't very. Sasori's sources had been able to helpfully supply the knowledge that the Nine-Tails and his tutor had gone on a training trip of an indefinite duration at a location that was undisclosed to study topics completely unknown. All in all, he wasn't sure why someone had bothered to compile this for him. Really, the person in question had managed to put together almost three hundred pages on nothing. But spies loved their reports.

"Yes, Leader-Sama?" He set down page two hundred and thirty.

"I'd like to ask you a question."

"Yes, Leader-Sama?"

"I just got the strangest report from Sasori."

"Me too, Leader-Sama."

"No, somehow I doubt it."

"Two hundred pages so far and nothing worth writing down."

"As dull as that might be, it's not what I had in mind."

Itachi cocked his head.

"I just got a report that a large swathe of Konoha is currently either destroyed or considered structurally unsound."

"How strange, Leader-Sama."

"It's due to-

"Because I always got the impression that Shodai-sama was rather good about foundations."

"Funny you should mention that-

"So why would so much be damaged?"

"Anyway!" Pein sighed and rubbed his face. "I gather the problem is because someone launched a rather thorough attack on ROOT. To be exact, it seems that a person or persons unknown set explosive tags in ROOT's armory and at every key structural point in the large and sprawling underground complex."

"How did they manage that, Leader-Sama?"

"Well, and this is just a guess here, someone probably infiltrated the base and blew it up."

"Thank you, Leader-Sama. But what I meant was that I didn't understand how they blew it up a second time."

"You see, I mention this because of the timing of-come again?"

"I mean it was already blown up recently."

"Um... what?"

"When I visited Konoha to try and get some information on the Nine-Tails, Hari paid Danzo a visit."

"Yes, I'm trying to explain my issues with-

"And when he was there, he assassinated Danzo and proceeded to completely explode ROOT. I rather think a good bit of Konoha was..." Itachi sighed. "On fire when we left."

"I am aware."

"So how did someone manage to blow it up a second time?"

"They didn't."

Itachi blinked. "Help me out here, Leader-Sama?"

"I want to know why I'm finding out about this incident from Sasori."

"I do, too, Leader-Sama."

Pein closed his eyes for a moment and muttered to himself. "Itachi, when I ask you why I'm finding out from Sasori, it's a subtle hint."

Itachi blinked.

"Why didn't I find out from you, Itachi," Pein stated.

Itachi's head cocked to the side again.

"You should answer, Itachi."

"You did, Leader-Sama?"

"What?"

"I'm sure I filed a report, Leader-Sama."

"You didn't."

"Really, Leader-Sama?"

"I'm quite certain. I definitely would have noticed a report stating that my adoptive nephew blew up the entirety of one of the most secret and yet notorious ANBU operations in history. Also, I would have recalled reading a report that detailed your son blowing up a large chunk of Konoha and leaving the place aflame. Certain details tend to stick in the mind, you see."

"You're sure, Leader-Sama?"

"Oh yes. And you somehow failed also to report that your son had murdered one of the most dangerous ANBU commanders in history. Certainly the most devious. And then proceeded to run through most of Konoha, waving his severed arm."

"Oh."

"Indeed. You see, I'm quite glad this is a criminal enterprise Itachi. Because respectable members of society, even *ninja* society, don't blow up chunks of other villages without provocation, nor do they assassinate prominent members of the village with long histories as black-ops specialists, especially if they're not getting paid for it. And they most certainly do not *run through the village in question waving a severed arm!*"

"To be fair, Leader-Sama, it wasn't really Danzo's arm."

"Wait, what?"

"I am given to understand that it was some sort of creation using the cells of Shodai-sama."

"How does that even work?"

"Not a clue, Leader-Sama. But I'm keeping the thing sealed up."

"Good, good." Pein shook himself. "But why didn't you file a report?"

"I thought I had, Leader-Sama. I guess I must have had other things on my mind."

"Things that obscured the massive attack on a major village?"

"Yes, Leader-Sama."

Sleepless in Hogwarts

Chapter 25: Sleepless in Hogwarts

"Hari."

"Yes, Daphne?"

Daphne opened her mouth and then shook her head and walked out of the Common Room.

"Um..." Hari turned to Blaise. "Can you translate?"

"Did you do anything to her since we last spoke?"

"No."

Blaise looked at Hermione. "What did he do?"

"I'm not quite sure." Hermione cocked her head. "Nothing really spectacular. He had me teaching Girl-Tobi-I *must* learn her real name-how to cast the levitation spell with a wand. It was a pain, too, because I'm finally comfortable not using one. And Daphne spent the night glaring at a pebble."

Blaise frowned. "When you say 'the night'... Do you mean the whole night?"

"Well, yes." Hermione shrugged. "Why?"

"And Daphne's sister was also up the whole night?"

"I don't think it bothered her. She had more and more energy. I swear, it was exhausting to just watch her bounce."

"I think I may have stumbled on the answer, Hari." Blaise spun in a circle. "Hari?"

"I think he got bored," said Millicent as she and Pansy went by. "He left while you were talking to Hermione."

"Speaking of which," Blaise glared at Hermione, "why do you seem so blasé about this?"

She shrugged. "I had to put up with it all last year. It just didn't faze me. I was much more annoyed by him sticking a ten-year-old in my bed without warning." Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. "And the worst part was that her feet were cold."

X

X

"Aren't you going to ask her why she's upset?" hissed Tracy. When she got no answer, she nudged Hari. Rather, she tried and nearly fell off the bench as he dodged. "Well?"

"Ask who what?" replied Hari. He was having a slice of toast with jam—he'd found that *some* local food had merit. Even if the crumbs got everywhere.

"Daphne!"

"What about Daphne?"

Further down the table, Daphne was pointedly not looking at Hari. People who were skilled in reading minutia of body language, in possession of a Byakugan, or both, could tell she was paying attention to every word of the conversation. From the glower, someone who was interested in reading her expression could glean that she was displeased with its progress.

"Aren't you going to ask her why she's upset?" Tracy blinked. "Why is Astoria running around the Gryffindor table?"

"She appears to be full of energy." Hari facing away from the table in question. "Apparently she is energized by staying up all night." Hari

had been forced to raise his voice slightly to be heard over the sounds of 'wheeeee!' coming from behind him.

"She's the only one," growled Hermione as she slammed her bag down next to Hari. "Most people need sleep."

"Only after a few days."

"I didn't mind teaching her," continued Hermione, ignoring him, "it was fun. She's a really sweet girl," there was a snort from Daphne, "but I'm *not* going to do it all night again. At midnight, I'm going to sleep."

"What about Girl-Tobi?" asked Blaise.

"She seems to be fine."

"Why aren't you upset about anything?" Blaise was frowning at his friend in concern.

"I'm on the far side of exhausted," muttered Hermione. "I passed through the furious stage at about four a.m. At this point, I'm hard pressed to care about anything."

"Ah."

"HARIHARIHARI!"

"Yes, Girl-Tobi?"

"You know," grumbled Hermione, "it's totally unfair that he's not even hyper."

"Will you be coming to class with me today?"

"Maybe." Hari cocked his head. "I can skip Herbology, so I'll come with you for your first period."

"Yay!"

"I'll make your excuses to Professor Sprout," said Hermione. "I'll tell her you suggested she go boil her head."

"Sure."

X

X

"Mister Potter."

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"I cannot help noticing that you are in my classroom."

"Yes, Professor Snape."

"I only comment on this otherwise rare occurrence because you are not, in fact, supposed to be here."

Hari just stared at him.

"It is, to be clear here, time for the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor class. The *First Year* Hufflepuff-Gryffindor class."

"Yes, Professor Snape."

"Are you a First Year?"

"No, Professor Snape."

"And if I told you to leave?"

"I'd stay where I am."

"I see."

"I'm glad, sir; I'd hate to think you were blind."

Hari kept a hand on Astoria's shoulder, preventing her from bouncing out of her seat as Professor Snape began his usual first-year-lecture. "Pay attention, Girl-Tobi," instructed Hari. "This can be useful and he isn't lying like the rest of your teachers."

Snape blinked for almost fifteen seconds before managing to remember what he'd been talking about and resume his speech. It took almost twice as long as usual; for some odd reason, he continued to dwell on the dangers of failing to follow instructions and the hazards of improper or careless preparation. By the time he got to the day's potion, nearly the entire class was looking at its cauldrons in stark terror. Snape, meanwhile, was staring at the blonde who he kept expecting to levitate out of her seat on the power of vibrating hyperactivity alone.

"Mister Potter." Professor Snape was standing next to Astoria's cauldron.

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"Might I enquire as to why you are here?" He watched as Hari's hand snapped out and grabbed a stray rat-tongue before it could fall into the cauldron. At that stage in the brewing, it would have caused the entire concoction to melt through the cast iron and then the stone floor below until it ran out of steam some unMerlinly place near the core of the Earth.

"I felt it best, sir."

Snape closed his eyes for a moment and massaged his temples. "Yes. I can see that. Loathe as I am to do this... ten points to Slytherin for making my life slightly less difficult. Carry on."

"What was that about, Hari?" asked Astoria.

"Nothing," Hari replied. He absently prevented her from adding a bit of platypus spleen to the mixture-which would have made the otherwise rather harmless color-change potion become a source of

chlorine gas. "Don't worry about it." Although it was against his principles, he decided to let Girl-Tobi sleep when she had Potions the next day. He'd been counting and there had already been a half-dozen near-fatalities. It was getting silly.

X

X

"Now, Girl-Tobi," said Hari. "I'm going to go to my Defense class. So be on your best behavior." He paused. "It's Herbology next for you, so you don't have to pay much attention. Unless Professor Sprout says that it's a dangerous plant, you can just ignore her." He shoved his way through a group of upper years without comment. "But don't be rude."

"Yes, Hari."

"Good." Hari waved to the group of Gryffindors as he walked off. There was something odd about the girl-who-turned-out-to-be-a-Weasley. Her expression was off. Was that adoration and contempt? And she had a weird aura around her. It was probably something he should mention to the Medic if he saw her.

X

X

"How was her first period?" asked Tracy. She knew her best friend wanted to ask. Probably. Then again, Daphne loved Astoria *from a distance*. The closer her sister was, the less she liked the girl.

"Not bad," said Hari. He'd been sitting in the Defense classroom when they walked in. "I think she only nearly killed everyone twice."

There was a silence.

"Really?" snapped Hermione. "You're all shocked? Did you miss how last year, Neville alone had twice that many incidents every class?"

"You seem to be annoyed again." Blaise shifted his seat slightly further from her.

"The adrenalin is wearing off."

"Welcome, class!" Gilderoy Lockhart danced into the room. And it was a dance. The man had three pirouettes in it. He'd even ended on a bow so low that his impressively golden hair brushed the stone floor. "This year I will be teaching you how to defend yourselves from the most dangerous things in the magical world."

Hari raised an eyebrow. It seemed that the façade was going to be continued here. How odd. What was Lockhart playing at here at Hogwarts?

"There are a great many things to worry about in our world. I have faced nearly all of the magical threats that exist. Banshees and Bollywogs, Necromancers and Narcophiliacs, Thestrals and Thwibituftins. I was the only survivor of the hunt for the Dread Gazeebo of Tahiti. I even dueled in single combat the Fwfrmlbrnfsdkr of Ouoaiuoaeauaieoeoioieauieuaiestan. Compared to these, you all can rest easy in the knowledge that you have had the worst fended off for you, but that is no excuse for failing to pay attention in this class. Don't forget that the greatest challenge I've ever had is keeping my place as winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile award for five years running. There are always challenges, no matter your life. For more on my secrets to a charming smile, you can purchase my book *How to Grin Your Best*, available at all good book shops everywhere for the low, low price of just forty galleons. If you order it in the next twenty-four hours, I'll throw in my book of grooming charms-just the thing to keep you at your most handsome before an important appearance.

"But first, we will begin our journey of adventure together by doing some preparations! I will now administer a test to see how well you have prepared yourselves for my class." There was something disconcerting about how Harry Potter's one visible eye was spinning

and the raised eyebrow over it wasn't helping. Lockhart hurriedly went down the aisles, handing each student a rolled up scroll.

Hari turned to Blaise and Hermione. "He's really quizzing us on things like his favorite color?" There was a sound of skepticism in his voice normally reserved for people who are literally having trouble believing their own eyes.

"What are you talking about?" hissed Hermione. She had already begun forming something of a low opinion of Lockhart on her own. She'd tried to look up a couple of his more prominent victories and had the unfortunate problem of discovering that no one had heard of the place that it had happened in and similar issues. On the other hand, she'd been raised properly and so was trying to pay deference to politeness towards the teacher.

Hari didn't respond.

When Lockhart reached the front of the class, he turned and bowed, "you may unfurl the scrolls and begin."

There was some rustling. "How did you know?" came Miss Granger's voice.

"Trade secret."

"What trade?"

"Trade secret."

"You know, I'm really torn."

"Oh?"

"I could easily ace this test. But I'm not sure I care enough." Lockhart cleared his throat. "I guess I might as well ace it. Why not."

"Disbutandum de est non gustibus." Hari took out a ballpoint pen.

"Hari?"

"Yes?"

"Did you just quote jumbled Latin?"

"No."

"I'm pretty sure you did."

"Nope." Hari quickly began to jot down answers. "Everyone, the answer to the secret bonus question is three inches." There was a clatter as Lockhart's peacock quill dropped from his fingers and onto the floor. "Trade secret."

By the time the class had finished its collective scribbling of answers, Lockhart had regained his composure and was humming a song by Undead Victoria and the Imperial Ambitions. "Let's see how you did." He walked the rows, collecting the filled out tests.

"How many people knew that my favorite color is magenta? Not bad, not bad. How did you come to 'vomit green' Mister Goyle? I advise you to reread my collected works on the Balygowan Banshee. All six volumes. Very good work, Miss Granger, citing chapter and line... Mister Potter? Might I ask why you answered 'my guts on the floor'?"

"I didn't."

"Oh." Lockhart shuffled the pages. "And again, I commend Miss Granger on her exact knowledge of my text detailing the Tracking of the Timbuktu Tyrant in which I mention that I am fond of sleeping on the left side of the bed." He looked at a page with a distinct lack of scratch marks from a quill and his face turned bright red. "While your answer is *technically* correct, Mister Potter, I would prefer it to be in a less purple phrasing."

"I thought you liked purple, Professor."

Lockhart stared at Hari for several moments before apparently deciding he hadn't just heard that and went back to sitting on his desk, reading the tests. "Oh my. Mister Malfoy, I have to say that your commitment to the strength of our way of life is commendable, but the greatest threat to our society is not 'those horrid know-it-all mudbloods who should all go die'. Very good work, Miss Granger at knowing that it is, indeed, mindless bigotry. On the other hand, Mister Malfoy, excellent knowledge of textiles for your answer that Acromantula silk is my least favorite cloth fibre. You are most right that it chafes and is only used by silly Nuevo Riche. And no, Mister Potter, it is not 'the skin of my many victims, cured in the blood of unicorns'."

"You mean you prefer that to Acromantula silk, Professor?"

"What?"

"Oh that."

"Moving on. I do worry that some of you didn't bother to read the textbooks before class. How did you all miss the question about the Autocratic Automobile of Austro-Hungary? Except for you, Miss Granger. Kudos on remembering that the weak point on a Muggle Automobile is the driver. I was able to stop the dangerous device without loss of life by cutting off the Muggle's head."

"Without loss of life?"

"Of course. Not a single Witch or Wizard was ever put in danger at all. Also, I commend your detailed answer on the methods by which the natives of Mongolia taught me to track through Yucatan ruins and hunt the jaguar that terrorize their lives daily as well the dangers of their majestic Rocky Mountains."

"I wanted to ask you about that, Professor..."

"But I am most heartened to see that almost all of you realized that the greatest gift I could ever receive would be absolute world peace

for everyone. Except for you, Mister Potter. I'm a bit concerned by your thought that I would most like... well... that is... umm... you really shouldn't have told everyone the answer to the secret question!"

X

X

"What on earth did you write as his desired, gift, Hari?" muttered Millicent.

"Never mind what, how about why did you write things that made him worried?" interjected Pansy.

"Well, to tell the truth, I want to meet the real Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Explain," ordered Hermione. She had noticed that despite the normal, human tendency to request a second iteration of input that didn't register as making sense, Hari had no patience for it and so bypassed it by asking for clarification instead.

"Well, Lockhart is quite possibly the most accomplished Wizard of all time, right?"

"Excepting maybe Merlin and Albus Dumbledore and a few others? Yes."

"Exactly." Hari had worked it out. He knew that plenty of important people used body doubles. There was no other reason why the handsome man would be just a pudgy, balding dork under glamours. And the act? It had to be an act. The more memorable the double, the less likely people were to remember the real one. After seeing this guy, who would look for someone less flamboyant, even wearing the same face. That was to say nothing of the blatant inconsistencies in his books. What better way to throw off his enemies than to hide the truth of his exploits in absolute rubbish so that no one could be sure which were real and which weren't? It was genius.

Hari was determined to meet the man behind the man, so to speak. He could learn so much from a man so skilled at casual slaughter of dangerous foes.

(A/N John)

I realized I should explain Hari's attitude. So I did. I wish I could say I had a lot of stuff to comment on this chapter, but I feel like it really speaks for itself.

Time, Pixies, and Eye(brow)s

Chapter 26: Time, Pixies, and Eye(brow)s

Going against all previous evidence, Professor Snape was repeatedly grateful for Hari's presence in his class. Not, of course, the class for Second Year Slytherins, but the class with First Year Gryffindors. He had stopped awarding Hari points after the second class, at which time he had learned that Hari was protecting people from a hyperactive Girl-Tobi because he'd kept her up all night. It was rather pleasing in a way for Professor Snape to see that for once, Harry Potter was actually taking care of a problem he'd caused. It was almost enough to earn points. Almost. But the gray hairs each time she nearly blew something up while grinning like a loon were enough to keep that from happening.

The rest of the Professors were rather less sanguine about matters. Girl-Tobi (what was the girl's real name, anyway?) was bouncing wildly in her seat more often than not. It didn't help that she was learning spells at about the same rate as her classmates. Who were a year older and using wands. What made it worse was that the girl had even less self-control than Harry Potter. Or was worse at hiding it. Either way. She had taken to ambushing students with wandless tickling charms in the hallways and laughing wildly. (Who was "Harley Quinn"?)

The only time of complete peace was dinner. Despite the girl's obscene energy levels, she crashed daily at the table. More often than not, she spent the meal passed out face-first in a plate of mashed potatoes and snoring gently, raising bubbles of gravy. It said something about the nature of Hogwarts that no one had tried to get their revenge yet, despite the fact that several of the stricter Professors would have gladly turned a blind eye in exchange for a day or two with Girl-Tobi in Hospital instead of class.

There was a betting pool in the teacher's lounge as to how soon Daphne Greengrass would commit an act of great violence. Given her state of apparent sleep-deprivation, they figured it was any day now; every time Girl-Tobi sat down next to Harry Potter, she twitched a bit and reached for a wand she didn't have. Which was another thing bothering the staff. Why was another of Harry's companions without her wand suddenly? They resolved to look into it and then decided there were better things to do than ask questions about Harry Potter.

The exception to that was Gilderoy Lockhart. He was having a slowly worsening year. Things kept happening to him. They were minor, but slowly escalating in severity and he had been unable to find out the cause. It had begun in the first week of the term, when he discovered he was tripping every time he left his office. Then it was everything in his room being moved just a bit out of place, causing him to slam his shins all the time. Things like that. Nothing he could point to as being anything other than absentmindedness, but it was making life most unpleasant.

Progress was being made in that Hari was sometimes remembering that Girl-Tobi had Potions the next day and would let her sleep a bit as a result, which had reduced the near-misses greatly. On the other hand, Daphne was only sometimes talking to him. It wasn't helping that she was beginning to get the hang of levitating a pebble (thanks to Hermione's quiet pointers). It wasn't enough to keep Astoria out of her bedroom nightly, but it was motivating her. That was the worst part (aside from having her sister able to access her room every night): it was getting her to work harder than she would have.

Hari hadn't gotten around to doing much proper exploring so far this year. He was finding it was still amusing to sit in on classes with Girl-Tobi. He still snickered each time he thought of Professor McGonagall's face when Girl-Tobi proceeded to follow in his footsteps (a bit) and windlessly transfigure a matchstick into a pin. The twitching...

Professor Snape had been discovering that the year which had begun frustratingly had begun to show signs of being a great windfall for him. Neville Longbottom, despite having the confidence of a routing army and a sense of self-worth normally found in body-doubles of particularly unpopular dictators with poor security forces, was proving to be a most apt student. Sometimes. He still made more mistakes than anyone should rightly manage without trying, but he demonstrated a theoretical aptitude for Potions that boggled the mind. Snape spent much of his time in the boy's presence bemoaning the fact that if only he had a bit more confidence, there might be a chance of him being a worthwhile student.

On the other hand, it was beginning to look like he might be able to publish a new paper on the longterm effects of Dimness Drought. For almost a full twenty-four hours after purging, Ronald Weasley had demonstrated an intelligence on the level of a Ravenclaw-if not actually Hermione Granger. And then, without warning, Ron began to blither away again and made a complete ass of himself. Most telling, though, had been that he'd begun to open his mouth while chewing again.

Professor Snape had taken samples of his vitae and come to the conclusion-pending further tests and evidence-that Ronald Weasley had been exposed to Dimness Draught so often that his body was now generating the stuff naturally. It was inconceivable and he suspected it to be the interaction of that and some number of other things that the boy's elder brothers had done to him over the years, but he was looking forwards to many years of studying the fascinating case and publishing the findings whose existence he was convinced could be blamed, somehow, on Harry Potter.

X

X

"So..." Pansy closed her eyes for a moment. "It's going to be Halloween tomorrow."

"Huh."

"Was that a questioning 'huh' or an acknowledgement of a statement 'huh'?"

Hari took a bite of uncooked fish.

"That's not an answer."

Another bite.

"Anyway, consider yourself warned."

"Warned?"

"*That* he picks up on," muttered Daphne. The bags under her eyes were getting worse. It wasn't helping that her sister was bouncing next to her.

"Just that it'll be a big to-do again."

"Oh." Hari perked up a bit. "Will there be another Troll?"

"No!"

"Oh." A pause. "You're sure?"

"Yes!"

"Because it was fun last year."

"Trolls do *not* feature heavily in Halloween festivities! Not fully grown Mountain Trolls."

"Shame. Perhaps something more interesting, then?"

Pansy turned to Tracy. "How about them..." she frowned.
"Whitechapel-born Anglicans?"

Tracy stared at her for several long moments. "Do you mean 'Wimborn Wasps'?"

"Yes?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Oh. How about the weather?"

"It's Scotland in Autumn. What else is there to say?"

"Perhaps," interjected Millicent, "you could just not talk to Hari since he's frustrating you?"

"And give him the satisfaction?"

"Well, if you had, you'd have noticed he'd gone about the time you looked away. So you seemed a bit silly to everyone else."

"Hn."

X

X

"Welcome to class!" Lockhart was his usual, over the top self. "Have a seat everyone, go on now." There was a certain amount of quiet grumbling; Lockhart had so far gone over a month without doing anything aside from reading aloud out of his books and sometimes reenacting the more elaborate scenes-the only remarkable thing about the class was that Hari kept showing up and staring fixedly at the Professor with that freakish eye of his, not blinking, for the entire class. Hopes were, therefore, not high for this lesson. "Today I have a treat for you. We're going to be having a practical lesson!" While the class did brighten up a little bit, he still frowned at the lack of an overwhelming cheer. His students drew their wands (with a few glaring exceptions- literally in the case of the raven-haired girl sitting several seats from Harry Potter- Lockhart kept meaning to ask the

other staff about that) and prepared themselves to learn something interesting.

Lockhart pranced over to a mound on his desk. It was a blanket draped over something that was making alarming squeaking noises and rattling as it shook. The students had been ignoring it and now looked mildly apprehensive. "Be very careful," instructed Lockhart. "These are only slightly dangerous. Of course, no harm will come to you while I am here, but I won't always be able to protect you. What I have for you today can be terrifying if you aren't prepared for-

"Cornish Pixies?" called Hari. He snickered. "According to *Mischievous Mites of My Miserable Myopia* by Mildred Mildredson, they can be dealt with by even small children with wands and adult supervision. So any halfway competent pubescent magic-wielder should be able to crush them by the score. And Gregory Gleebeezee says in his *Fifty Frustrating Fiends* that the Cornish Pixie is far from dangerous except if you have them near volatile potions. Otherwise they're just really annoying."

"Bah!" Lockhart waved a hand. "Book-bound idiots. What do they know about-"

"If I recall correctly, Mr. Gleebeezee had been involved in two successful nundu hunts."

"Amateur." Lockhart was scowling. "He has obviously never faced a true Cornish Pixie. They are far less humorous when they are splattering your humors around an area. Now, class, pay careful attention to how this spell is performed. Failing it would be disastrous if you encountered a full-fledged infestation of Cornish Pixies in your-"

A fireball raced from the middle of the room and enveloped the mound on the desk with a hundred tiny screams of pain before going on to strike the stone wall, which bubbled slightly for a moment. Lockhart stood stock still. His eyebrows had been scorched from his

face in an instant and his wand was now smoldering gently from the tip.

"I think my spell worked, Professor." Hari's voice was mild.

A small patch on the desk ceased to merely emit smoke and began to burn. Lockhart's face twitched. "DETENTION!" he roared. Mostly. Halfway through, his voice went strangely high and then trailed off as he began to cough. The whole class looked at Lockhart and then at Hari and then back and began to laugh. The scowl that marred the man's face turned his usually handsome countenance into a dark parody, his cheeks mottling red.

"As you like, Professor. Please be sure to actually show up to it." Hari rose and walked out of the classroom, whistling a Jerry Lee Lewis song. Hermione and Tracy began to snicker while the rest of the class stared at them in confusion (excepting one Ravenclaw who was staring into the distance, trying to place the tune).

"Did Hari just attack a Professor?" hissed Millicent. "Did I really just see that?"

"I think," replied Blaise as Lockhart began to glower at the class (which caused them to start laughing as they noticed his missing eyebrows), "that it might be more fair to say that Hari just Defense-ed us against a prospective threat in a most vigorously natural manner. And that our Professor just happened to be nearby."

"You call that 'natural'?" Hermione muttered.

"Looked like natural causes to me."

"There is something seriously wrong with you," interjected Pansy.

"Though that raises a good question," said Hermione. "How did Hari just throw a giant fireball?"

"I think he spit it, actually."

"That just makes it worse."

"Well Firewhisky can do that."

"Really?" Hermione paused. "Doesn't matter. Unless you think Hari has taken to drinking." She shuddered. "And isn't *that* a terrifying concept." The rest of the group nodded.

"The rest of you," Lockhart's attempt to look intimidating was somewhat ruined by his altered facial topiary, "get out of here."

It was a testament to the general feeling about the class that none of the Ravenclaws hesitated in exiting as quickly as possible. They did, of course, make a b-line for the library. The Slytherins split into two groups. One was made of Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and-sort-of Nott. No one cared where they went, though again, it spoke about the effect Hari had had on the school population that even Draco Malfoy was only mildly surprised by the fireball. That didn't stop him from going on at length as to how he could make a bigger fireball than Harry Potter to anyone who would listen (some of the slower portraits).

The other group took a quick vote and decided that as much as the Lake was tempting, it was autumn in Scotland and there was *no way* they wanted to be outside if they didn't have to be. Instead, they went back to the Common Room to get a head start on their homework-some because they didn't have any goofing off ideas right then and others because there was a real chance that they'd be up late for other reasons and so it was best to get the work done now.

And that left the Feast.

(A/N John)

I have to admit that this chapter was fun to write. Parts of it bored me, but huge parts kept making me snicker. Especially

Lockhart's desk. I just imagine a little cartoon-style fire breaking out on top of it and that's what makes him snap.

(A/N 2 John)

Speaking of Lockhart: I find several characters more fun to write when I ignore the more tropic standards. I know that I misused tropic there, but it seems about right. Anyways, you'll see in coming chapters that Lockhart has more to him than just an arrogant glory-hound.

(A/N 3 John)

And please don't get me started on some of the theories I have for him. I have other stories, they will get used.

(A/N 4 John)

I should note that those of you worried about our slowed schedule can blame Spoon. She managed to get several story ideas in my head and I ended up having to start them just to get them out again. The result is that I have a couple of extended one-shots or short stories coming up soon, being worked on sometimes instead of *Itachi*. Much to my chagrin.

(A/N 5 John)

I noticed a review wondering why there were so few author's notes and found myself thinking "but I had four in the most recent chapter!" then I remembered we hadn't published it yet. So yeah.

John Out

-Omake-

-A month or two ago-

"Itachi?"

"Yes, Kisame?"

The fish man frowned for a moment, working out how to broach the subject. "You didn't find another baby, right?"

Itachi cocked his head. "Why would you think that?"

"Umm it's just that last time... never mind. Did your headband slip?"

Itachi fingered the headband with its stylized leaf slashed through. "It would not appear so."

"Did you suddenly go blind?"

"Definitely not."

"What did you steal, then?"

"Come again?"

"What kind of eyes did you steal?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"You have a blindfold on." Kisame glared at his partner. "I know you well enough to know that you've got bandages to help with recovering from the transplants. So I ask you again: whose eyes did you steal?"

"No idea."

Kisame began to cough. "At the risk of asking a stupid question: *how* do you not know whose eyes you stole?" He paused. "I didn't mean to shout, but I am a bit confused here."

"Well, I stole them from a thief and he didn't label them." Pause.

"Well, actually, they were a gift, but the gift-giver stole them. And the

thief was too busy being dead to answer whose eyes they were."

Kisame was silent for a moment. "You implanted some random relative's Sharingan that my nephew, your son, plucked out of what I believe was described as plant-human clone-flesh?"

Pause. "Yes."

"Do you know what they do?"

"See things?"

"Of course." Kisame looked at the ceiling. "Wait here." He stalked out of the room.

Ten minutes later, a somewhat harassed-looking Pein entered, followed by Kisame, looking slightly smug. "Godsdamnit!"

"Leader-Sama?"

"Explain."

"I implanted new Kaleidoscopic Sharingan."

"Yes. I gathered that much from Kisame. *Why?*"

"Because I wanted to be able to see?"

"Itachi?"

"Yes, Leader-Sama?"

"Weren't your *old* eyes able to see?"

"Not well."

There was a reflective silence. "I think something went wrong with my Paths technique. I thought I heard you say that your eyes hadn't been able to see well."

"Your hearing is working just fine, Leader-Sama."

"I see."

"I didn't."

"No. We're not doing that." Pein rubbed his face slowly. "I'm going to regret this: where are the rest of the spares?"

"Spares?"

"You recovered ten-eleven-eyes. I see-shut up-two of them. There are eight missing."

"Well, I think Hari has a few of them in his seals."

"Dear gods," muttered Pein.

"And I have the rest."

"Oh good. And the arm from Danzo?"

"Hari has most of it, I think. I don't remember what he wanted to do with it."

"I'm not sure I'm happy with those answers."

"I'm sorry, Leader-Sama."

Pein turned and stormed out of the room. Then he suddenly poked his head back in. "I realize this is a bit off-topic, but what happened to *your* eyes?"

-elsewhere-

"NARUTO!"

The blond came running down the hall in the mansion that the Uchiha clan head and his family normally occupied. Technically, that

was what was going on now, but two felt rather small for the space. Or rather, Sasuke had expected it to, forgetting that Naruto's personality filled the available area.

"What?"

"Someone sent me a pair of Sharingan eyes."

Naruto looked at the jar. "That's... freaky?" He wasn't sure if that would offend his best friend, but it was true.

"Yeah, that about covers it. Except that they're Itachi's."

"Someone killed your brother and sent you his eyes?"

"No. That would have been easier. Instead, I got a letter. It says:

These are a gift, Little Brother. Use them to kill me.

Itachi.

P.S. Don't worry, I have spares.

"Uh..."

"Exactly."

"So, are you going to implant them?"

"Yes. Please see if Sakura can be spared from her training."

-Next Day-

"KYUBI!" The civilians were running around with even less coherence than usual when panicked.

Sasuke reflexively looked at his adopted brother before registering that he wasn't feeling the bowel-loosening fear that accompanied Naruto's demon-fueled rages. "Oh for godssakes..." he muttered as

ANBU came swarming from the shadows to dogpile Naruto, who was having trouble walking with his new, red eyes.

Feasts, Fights, and Stone Cold Pussy

Chapter 27: Feasts, Fights, and Stone Cold Pussy

"And so," began Dumbledore from his spot at the high table. He was wearing a blond fright-wig under a precariously perched NASCAR trucker-cap, blue eyeliner, a three-piece suit of neon orange and lemon yellow checks, a snot-green tie, curved white slippers so long the tips poked out from the table cloth on the other side, and a Groucho mask, "we begin another All-Hallow's Eve in which we celebrate the night of spirits by having them all attend Sir Nicholas's Death Day party and leaving us alone. We also celebrate, as we have for the last eleven years, the sadistic butchering of two of my closest friends and the orphaning of their only son. Everyone give yourselves a pat on the back for that one." He picked up an Erlenmeyer flask and took a deep draught. Then he belched out cooked shrimp in a cloud of fire and continued.

"I wish to call to your attention the wonderful absence of our spiritual comrades, whom we are, you will recall, celebrating. They are happily occupied with that aforementioned Death Day party and so we shall have a meal uninterrupted by Sir Nicholas's head falling almost-off and causing many students to vomit on my nice, clean floors. You'd think you lot would be used to it by now. Wimps.

"If Miss Girl-Tobi would be restrained from reaching the Chocolate Pumpkins until the end of the meal, I will be grateful. I'm looking at Messrs Weasley at the moment, since your sister has abandoned us to parts unknown on this night when there are no ghosts patrolling the corridors to make sure that things are safe."

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Daphne was glaring at Hari except when she was glaring at her sister, who was currently stuck to the bench by one of the twins while the other was taking the opportunity to practice his beating skills with a bat made of a ham, swatting away the sweets Astoria was levitating to herself. Several nearby students were already covered in shards of chocolate and smeared with various fillings.

"How did you manage to do this?"

Hari was quietly eating mochi and apparently hadn't heard her. "You guys are certain that the giant magical monster was a one-time thing, right?"

"Yes." Pansy sounded exasperated.

"Really certain?"

"Yes."

"Completely?"

" Yes! "

Hari shrugged. "Alright. I'll take your word for it."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"That's okay." Hari glanced up at the high table where Dumbledore was in an animated conversation with McGonagall about something that he wasn't following. He had no idea why the subject of kites and satellites had come up, so while the words were making sense, the content was not. Behind him, the Gryffindors were busy dodging flying candy debris and flecks of ham and turkey that were flying off the makeshift bats. As yet, the other tables had been spared the predation of Astoria's attempts to get sugary treats, but it was only a matter of time. There was a scuffle going on between Ronald and Girl-Tobi as she began to try and steal the pile of things he'd hoarded

for himself when it became clear that the food was slowly but surely making its way towards Girl-Tobi only to be battered into pieces.

Professor McGonagall had broken off her conversation and was instead alternating between glowering at the twins, who appeared to be enjoying themselves, Girl-Tobi, who also appeared to be having fun despite not getting what she wanted, and Dumbledore, who looked endlessly amused by the small area of utter chaos in the otherwise orderly (by Hogwarts standards) Great Hall.

"Miss Girl-Tobi," Dumbledore's voice cut through the general hubbub of a meal at Hogwarts by virtue of spellwork and a well-timed lull in the ever-present conversation. "I notice that a chocolate-covered corn-on-the-cob has begun to levitate itself away from the Ravenclaw table; should you begin to try and loot the other houses of their sweets, I will be forced to take drastic measures. Please, therefore, refrain from sugar thievery." He proceeded to make 'The Rocker' and bob his head wildly while 'I Luv You' played in the background. Then he sat down and resumed his discussion with McGonagall.

"Did that just happen?" muttered Hermione.

"No."

"You're a bad liar, Blaise."

"I know. Mother is so disappointed."

"I'm not dignifying that with further comment."

"You know, Hermione," said Tracy as she was comforting Daphne. "I'm surprised you're so calm about Halloween."

"Come again?"

"I mean: it was just a year ago that a Troll nearly killed you."

"That's a relative term. Hari seemed to find it mildly annoying."

"Still..."

"Well, it's not like I'm in some girl's bathroom instead of at the feast, so I'm not sure why I should be worried."

"Funny you should mention that..." began Hari.

"I swear, Hari, if you try and convince me that I'm in a girl's bathroom..."

"No, no. There are ways I could do that, but that wasn't what I meant. I was just going to ask if there's something about girl's bathrooms at Hogwarts that attracts monsters."

Millicent coughed. "Not really. Except for certain peri-erm... points during um... well... I'm going with no."

"Huh. Okay then."

"I don't like the sound of that," muttered Pansy, who'd been snickering at Millie's attempts.

"I do."

"Which only makes me more worried, Hari."

"I'm sorry?"

"Liar."

"Girl-Tobi is coming along nicely, isn't she?"

"Much to my everlasting regret, yes," hissed Hermione.

"You're concerned she'll outshine you?"

"No. Just worried that it's unwise to teach her how to use magic at all, let alone like this." Behind them, there was a shriek of dismay as Ron found his food whizzing away from him faster than he could eat

it. It appeared that Girl-Tobi was not even expecting to eat any of the food at this point, since she was no longer confining herself to sweets and was now stealing Ron's entire supply of goulash off of its egg-noodle bedding. It exploded as a ham smacked into it and sprayed nearly half the Gryffindors with meat and peas. "Just a feeling, mind you."

Someone had apparently had enough, since the rest of the red-garbed students began to fling more and more food at Fred and Fred, overwhelming the veteran beaters with projectiles ranging from dinner rolls to tureens of soup still in the tureen. The twins overturned the long table and used it as a shield from half the students as they dove to the side, leaving Girl-Tobi to drop to the ground out of the way of a wave of mashed potatoes and gravy. There was a squeaked sound of someone shouting 'but I didn't stay up late last night!'. There was also a faint weeping from McGonagall.

The Hufflepuffs began to dump food from their platters and use them as shields against the collateral comestibles. Then a stray turkey leg struck Hannah Abbott in the cheek and all hell broke loose. Most of the younger years took up dinner rolls and began to fling them at everyone not wearing yellow while the elder years scooped up piles of food and heaved them using the platters to launch a whole turkey at the Gryffindors.

Within seconds, the entire hall was coated in gravy and stuffing. The Slytherins weren't sure how they had gotten dragged into this mess. Hermione would have liked to blame Hari, but he'd avoided the whole thing. She suspected it was Crabbe and Goyle responding when Malfoy was struck by a ballistic boat of drippings and had replied with the contents of a dish of candied yams. Nevertheless, the result was the same. Alone in the chaos, Hari was sitting in an unsullied spot, eating his untouched food with that frustrating look that suggested that the busyness of the last few minutes had entirely escaped his notice.

Dumbledore, whose animated chicken had been joined by a few squires made from animated breadsticks, seemed unaware that his

suit was now spattered with bits of corn from when Snape had fended off an incoming barrage of pies by throwing what had been on his plate at the time.

"And now that we've had that *delightful* diversion," he said as he used a piece of bread to swab gravy from his beard, "I do believe that it is time for us to clean up." He hummed to himself as Filch stomped out of the hall and returned, leading a trudging line of animated mops and buckets that followed him like eager puppies as he handed them out to students.

"Professor Headmaster, sir," began Hari. Dumbledore didn't jump, although Snape's face had gone pale at the sudden noise of a student he was beginning to believe was actually some sort of torment designed to drive him further insane. "Isn't this cruel to the House Elves?"

"I suppose." Dumbledore shrugged and proceeded to grab his animated chicken and struck it with a ham until it stopped flailing. "But it feels right somehow. Chicken?" he held out a leg to Snape.

"Albus?"

"Yes?"

"Did you just bludgeon an animated chicken?"

"I had to get it to stop moving, didn't I?"

"Um..." Snape sighed and took the proffered limb. "Not bad," he mumbled through a mouthful of flesh.

"Gilderoy?" Dumbledore was looking over at his Defense Professor. The man had not reacted how Dumbledore had expected. If pressed, he would have admitted that he had thought that the fop would be curled under the table, sobbing over his ruined coif and the damage to his expensive dress robes. Instead, he was maintaining the aspect of a conquering general, his clothing was tattered and what wasn't

actually torn was stained beyond recovery with foodstuffs. His hair had been coated thoroughly with grease and was no longer elegantly curled, but plastered to his head when not encrusted around bits of carrot. Through it all, he still looked as though he had been the victor of a great battle instead of a foolish idiot who had just had his looks trashed.

"Yes, Albus?" And Merlin, the man even sounded as though there was nothing wrong.

"At the risk of asking a silly question, why are you standing with a foot on a roasted pig?"

"It's all about presentation, Albus." The man had a stern expression and struck a pose that suggested that this were a great beast he had slain, instead of a domestic animal that had been gutted a day prior and roasted until even magic wouldn't have gotten it moving again.

"Yes, yes. Would you get off my table, please? This is where we eat. I don't want your shoes on it."

Lockhart reluctantly clambered down from his place, sitting with some distaste in a pool of sweet potato that had oozed there.

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"You're certain about the monsters, right?"

"Yes, Hari."

"Darn." He snapped his fingers and then sat beside Hermione, who had stopped using her mop and was instead giving an impromptu lesson in basic household cleaning to a group of Purebloods who had never heard of manual labor.

"You could help, you know," muttered Daphne.

"Good point." Hari rose and walked off. She was about to start cursing when she noticed that he had intercepted her sister and was now working to moderate Astoria's energetic attempts to help clean by running around moving things with a mop as much as possible. And had just convinced her that she might not have the balance to wear brushes on her feet and clean that way. No one seemed amused that Hari was giving this lecture from atop a pair of sponges that he was gliding around Girl-Tobi on.

Fred and Gred had been distracted by having to keep Ron from fleeing and making sure their little sister didn't hit their brother for some unspecified crime. All the while, they were busily harassing Percival about his Prefect badge being invisible under a layer of treacle.

"What's Peeves doing here?" asked Hari.

Forge and Fred looked up. There was Dumbledore in what appeared to be a deep and marginally serious discussion with the poltergeist. Although they *were* entertaining the idea that the reason for the comparative peace was that Peeves wasn't sure what could be done to increase the chaos without crossing the line from cruelly funny to just plain insane.

"No idea," replied Gred.

"Oh, wait," added George. Peeves had just picked up an unused pie and smooshed it into Dumbledore's face with the air of a connoisseur. He watched the way the custard dribbled and nodded in satisfaction; then he kissed his fingers and proceeded to flip off the Hall before vanishing. "That's much better."

"I guess so." Hari skated past Astoria, nodding to her as she levitated food from the floor into a pile, before screeching to a halt beside Hermione.

"How goes the learning?"

"Surprisingly well. Professor Snape glaring from up there seems to have helped motivate them to listen for once." She gestured at the upper years, who were glowering at her, but nevertheless helping to clean with mops and buckets. "Millie is also a great help." Millicent had slung a roasted pig under each arm and was casually moving them to the side, unaware that each weighed almost as much as she did.

"Why haven't you learned household charms?" grumbled Tracy as she watched the Hufflepuffs use magic to animate most of their cleaning supplies.

"Because I can't use magic at home?" replied Hermione.

"It'd be nice though."

"I'll put it somewhere on my list of things to learn."

Hari smacked his forehead. "That's what I've been forgetting!" From somewhere, he pulled out a brush and began to doodle ideographs on a scrap of parchment.

"And now, we shall begin a new tradition." Dumbledore managed to be heard over the grumbling of several hundred students. "We are heading back to our Common Rooms via the Second Floor. I have no reason for this. Thank you."

"Why are we doing that?" hissed Pansy.

"No idea."

"Hari?"

"Yes?"

"Innocence is a terrifying look for you."

"Sorry, Pansy."

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"My cat!" Filch's voice was audible at the back of the crowd. For those like Hari and his friends who were at the front of the lot (by virtue of Hari, though none of them could say quite how he managed that) it was almost deafening. Lying in a pool of liquid was a four-legged block of stone.

"It doesn't look much like her, Mister Filch," said Hari.

"What?"

"I recall Missus Norris being rather more fury. And she wasn't made of... shale? I'm sorry, geology isn't my strong suit, so I'm guessing at the mineral composition here."

"It looks just like her!"

"Again: fur? Also, I recall her having more color to her than gray."

Dumbledore waved his wand. "I believe you are both correct."

"Alright, Professor Headmaster."

"You're just accepting that?" muttered Pansy.

"Sure. One of my Uncles covers himself in granite sometimes."

"It would appear that this is, indeed, Mrs. Norris, but turned to stone. Professor Sprout?"

"Yes?"

"We have Mandrakes growing in the Greenhouse, correct?"

"Yes. Assuming my second-years don't kill the crop, they'll be ready come June."

"So we will be without one of our patrols for most of the year, then?"

"Unless you wish to buy some Mandrake Drought."

"Professor Snape?"

"Not at today's prices. We can afford it, but the complaints from Mister Malfoy's father... just buy him a new litter, Albus. It'd be a few sickles." There was a general outcry on the lines of 'no! Drown them first!' and similar. Snape smiled thinly. "Ah, young people. Such innocent minds, right, Albus?"

Dumbledore reached into a pocket and pulled out a Galleon. He dropped it into Filch's unresisting hand. "There. Go to Biisty Alley tomorrow and get as many kittens as that buys."

"But... but that won't be my cat!"

"Then give me back the Galleon and wait until June." Filch clutched the coin to his chest. "That's what I thought."

"Um... Professor Dumbledore?" called Ron.

"Yes, Mister Weasley... the youngest?"

"I realize I'm not on my Purging right now, but shouldn't we address the thing about and 'Heir' and 'Beware' and stuff?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "It's probably just the Heir of Slytherin trying to scare us after opening the Chamber of Secrets again. Why give him or her any more attention than necessary. Especially when all that he or she has managed is to petrify a cat that exactly one person in the whole castle even tolerates, let alone likes." He ignored the cry of outrage from Filch. "Now, off to bed."

(A/N John)

So again, it is because Spoon was sick that this is running late.
Blame her. You can also blame her for the shrimp.

(A/N 2 John)

I loved writing the food fight scene. I promise they will only get crazier in the future.

(A/N 3 John)

Also, the title was just one of those things that made Spoon choke.
So I went with it.

(A/N 4 John)

Spoon needs to stop getting sick so we can finish this fic.

(A/N Spoon)

I'm sorry.

Petrified of Dueling

Chapter 28: Petrified of Dueling

"Hari?"

"Yes, Pansy?"

"You knew."

"That's a statement, Pansy."

"And?"

"So I can't respond to it."

"Fine. Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That there was something going on."

"No."

"Liar."

"I checked and was soundly assured that there wasn't anything."
Sssso hungry "I figure that this school has bad luck with girl's bathrooms. On Halloween, anyways."

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"You're late for Transfiguration," remarked Blaise.

"I missed breakfast entirely! Did you know that both copies of *Hogwarts: A History* are checked out of the library? I never bothered

to memorize the school edition of it. The public-copy doesn't have anything about the Chamber of Secrets."

"Huh." Hari looked a bit puzzled. "You could have asked me."

"Asked you what?" snapped Hermione.

"For a copy. I checked them out around midnight." Hari held out a copy of the text. It was prompted snatched from his fingers at a healthy approximation of ninja-speed. "It's page 28,343 in the second Appendix."

"That's just wonderful," she grumbled. "There's blessed little about it beyond that the founder for whom our house is named was apparently an egomaniac beyond even that required to name a house in the school after himself and he instead decided to create some sort of secret chamber with a devious, no-doubt snakey, monster inside it to one day be unleashed by his Heir (why is capitalized, anyway?) to rid the school of any who are unworthy. How nice. Apparently that would be anyone who isn't a Pureblood. Are there any people here who qualify?"

Pansy shrugged. "Officially? Or in reality?"

"Both." Hari and Hermione spoke in unison.

"Officially, a good portion of the school is Pureblooded. In reality? I would be shocked if anyone really had *no* Muggle blood. But I would wager that what most people have in mind when they think of Slytherin's victims would be people who are, well, 'muddy'." She held up her hands defensively as Hermione began to look vexed. "I'm not advocating it, okay! I'm just saying that it's what most people will be thinking. So I would expect you to be pretty high on that target list."

"Think about it, Hermione," said Daphne, who had broken off glaring at Hari for a moment. "You're highly intelligent, outperforming all of your year (Hari doesn't count) and are close to several prominent heirs, not the least of which is the heir to the admittedly defunct

Potter title. It's one of those names that is *supposed* to come with all sorts of perks, but really is just a name. It's like a glorified version of 'Smythe'."

"So I'm likely to be hunted for being better?"

"If you want to be blunt? Yes." Tracy shrugged. "Speaking as someone who'd be pretty high on the target-list, you outrank me not just because of your parents, but because you make those who are supposed to be better question their self-worth. Even Pansy does that with you around."

"Hardly. I did that last year. I've come to conclusions about my self-worth, thank you. I've concluded that one statistical outlier (Hari, you don't count so shut up) does not mean that I'm inferior. It just means Hermione is exceptional, even by exceptional standards."

"Thanks?"

"Ahem." The group turned. "I hope you don't feel I'm interfering in your discussion, but I was thinking I might like to teach my class at some point this morning. Would it be convenient for me to begin now? Or should I find something else to do while you continue?"

Hermione turned bright red. Hari opened his mouth to answer.

"Mister Potter, shut your hole." Professor McGonagall scowled at him. "Do me a favor and cut class today. Please. I want to teach."

Hari shrugged and propped his feet on his desk before closing his eye and apparently dozing off.

"I'll take what I can get."

X

X

Three crowded weeks passed as weeks do. In this case, it was a blur of blonde hair as far as much of the castle could remember. Girl-Tobi was wonderfully eager to learn, but she had the slight failing of being too active to bother paying attention to anything. The tickle-attacks continued unabated, but it was somehow just not as worrying with something turning a cat to stone. Though most people pointed out that this was a normal risk at Hogwarts and people should really relax about it.

Daphne was quietly planning her revenge against Hari. It was all the more important, since she was finding that Astoria was acting as a brilliant motivator. She kept wondering if she should write her parents to let them know where her sister was, but Hari kept distracting her. She wasn't where she would have been with a wand, but she was rapidly recovering her losses, just staying ahead of her apparently genius sister. The girl was picking things up at a rate that wasn't good for Daphne's sanity.

The only thing that made the three-week mark noteworthy was that at three weeks after Halloween, Colin Creevy was petrified in the hallway outside Gryffindor Tower. Dumbledore announced it at dinner, eight hours later, as a minor feature of the day, listed after the congratulations to the Ravenclaw Quidditch team for finding a new Seeker in Miss Cho Chang and that Hagrid was over his slight cold.

There was some concern amongst the students, but it was dismissed by Dumbledore as being a minor aberration. That continued to be the case over the *next* three weeks, as another seven students were petrified. Each was mentioned in passing as a thing that happened, but not worth really considering. When a fifth student was petrified in four weeks, Dumbledore announced that there would be extra homework on how petrification could impact scholastic achievement.

In the second week of December, with two petrifications that morning (one of them being Miss Derbile, the sixth year Prefect from Ravenclaw), Dumbledore announced that one of the world's foremost experts on magical combat would be giving a lesson that

evening in the form of a dueling club. The cheers died down somewhat when it was mentioned that this expert was Gilderoy Lockhart, who studiously ignored that aspect. There was a more mixed response when he added that Professor Snape would be assisting. Part of the reason for the lackluster applause was that Professor Snape was glaring at the Headmaster with the expression of a man who was not told about his impending execution until the hangman was testing the trapdoor.

"I hope he really shows up tonight," muttered Hari.

X

X

"Before I adjourn our dinner to allow Gilderoy-shut up-to begin his 'lesson', I wish to inform you that another student was petrified today. I would have left this for a later time, but I felt I should mention it since it was, in fact, the Head Boy. Now I will ask all of you who do not enjoy broken pelvises-I'm looking at Miss Brown over there in Hufflepuff. Yes you; I heard that story from Poppy. Six, really?-please get up and step outside. Thank you."

The school watched from the entrance as Dumbledore waved his wand once at the wall behind him. All the tables sank into the floor and the benches arranged themselves facing the raised dais, several rising on invisible support to create bleachers. The floor under his feet suddenly had a dueling circle scored on it.

"Gilderoy, over to you. And now, I think I shall turn in early." Dumbledore strode out of the hall without a backward glance.

There was a bright flash of light and a blond man was standing in the middle of the dueling circle, spotlights shining down on him. His expertly coifed hair bounced as he rose from his bow and smiled. "Come in and take a seat!" Half the students headed to bed. He scowled as the remainder filed in and settled themselves on benches that swayed gently under their weight.

"Tonight, we will begin by discussing some of the most important aspects of formal dueling. The first and foremost thing is to remember to come dressed correctly. If you don't make a good impression, then you're not doing it right. You see how I am wearing the latest in Madam Huribal's dueling-wear. Note the gold embroidery on the cream fabric. It tells those who know how to read it that I am an inducted member of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Wands. Also, the way I have my cuffs folded back is a sign that I prefer the Ambugaba style of dueling. It's not very popular here in Europe, but I learned it from a chap in Mumbai who swore by it and it has never failed me. The cut of my robes and the trim of ermine can let those who know to look for it in on the fact that I have been thrice-blooded by baiting of a great beast."

Lockhart struck what was an admittedly heroic pose. "This is the opening stance of the Ambugaba style. For all of you beginning, however," he adjusted his robes, making minute adjustments that had no apparent effect on the overall look, "we will use the more traditional Merlin II, the preferred learning stance." He struck a pose that was much less heroic, but much more effective in that it involved holding his wand.

"Now, who can tell me what the single most important spell in dueling is?"

"The one that hits?"

"Ha ha ha. Very good, Mister Potter. That is technically true and something you would all do well to remember. It does not matter how grand your spell is if you miss. Imagine casting a dueling variant of a pain curse and discovering that you have caused your opponent's cat a great deal of distress. You would feel rather foolish (although not as foolish as if it had been *your* cat). So hitting the target is very important." He cleared his throat. "*However*, what I had been asking about was a particular spell."

"Stunner?"

"No, Mister Hopkins."

"Entrails expulsion?"

"Strictly forbidden, Miss Grace. And I wonder where a good young witch like yourself ever heard of it."

"A miscast levitation charm?"

"No, Mister Finnegan. How did that even come to mind?"

"It can summon a buffalo onto someone, Professor."

"That's a new one. And still no."

"If I may, Gilderoy?"

"Certainly, Severus."

"It would be the disarming charm."

"Correct! Would you educate the students as to why?"

"Because a disarmed wizard is a dead wizard."

"Defeated, Severus. This is a duel. Now, we shall demonstrate." Lockhart began to walk towards the far end of the dueling circle.

"Expelliarmus!"

The red beam of light struck Lockhart in the back and launched him out of the circle, ass over teakettle, until he came to a screeching halt against a stone wall, feet waving in the air. His wand sailed sedately into Snape's hand. The man hadn't taken a stance, just raised his wand and fired off the spell.

"Yes, thank you, Severus." Lockhart rose to his feet and dusted himself off. He limped back towards the circle. "Perhaps we should

have a couple of students come down here? Say Mister Potter and Mister Weasley?"

Snape held up a hand. "Not Weasley. He's just possibly getting to merely dim. No... Drudine." The Seventh Year rose and walked down to the circle where he was surprised to find Hari already waiting.

"So the two of you are to fight—" Lockhart blinked as the older boy fell backwards, blood spraying from his throat.

Snape sighed and knelt beside the student, drawing his wand over the wound and muttering a battlefield triage spell. He shifted the boy's head to rest in his lap and tried to raise him up a bit. "You were supposed to use magic." There was a flash and then Snape realized that the boy's intestines were spilling out from a slit in his stomach. "To disarm him." And another flash left all four of the boy's limbs removed.

"I figured I should disleg him too, just to be safe, Professor." Hari had his hands in his pockets at the other end of the dueling circle. "I'm not quite good enough with it to get through the spine though, I see. I should work on that."

"And I see that we should have had Madam Pomfrey here." Snape grumbled to himself for a moment. "I don't know enough battlefield medicine to save him. Would whomever has been petrifying people please deal with him so we can revive him later with a medic around?" There was a pause. "No questions asked." No one moved. Well, except for the boy who was gasping and trying to move missing limbs to scoop his guts back inside. Snape set the boy's head on the floor and rose, backing away. "Mister Potter. Please put him out of my misery."

There was an eye-searing blast of light and a boom that echoed off the walls, knocking students from their seats to fall in a heap on the stone floor. When Snape could see again, he saw that Drudine had been turned into a shadow on the floor. "Yes. That will just about do

it." He waved his wand and a spectral doe appeared. "Tell Professor Dumbledore to come down here. Bother him until he does and tell him it's his fault, so he can clean it up."

Ten minutes later, Professor Dumbledore was standing in front of the assembled students. He was wearing a dressing gown in rainbow colors and had bunny slippers on his feet. The bunnies in question had red mouths and glowing eyes and their heads kept straining towards the nearest person. His beard was in curlers for some reason-no one could think why, given the straightness it usually maintained. On his head was a tall hat that had teeth around the brim that nibbled at his scalp absently. It had a tassel on it. And eyes that were closed with an expression of contentment.

"What seems to be the trouble, Severus?" he asked. His left slipper was leaning down and licking at the pool of blood beside him. Its twin was stealthily moving its foot to get a turn.

Snape rubbed his face for a moment. "Well, we have a dead student, for one thing, Professor Dumbledore. That's a bit worrying. And I have a bunch of traumatized students. That's also an issue." Madam Pomfrey had been roused and was currently administering Calming Draughts in hot cocoa from a cauldron tended by House Elves. She took occasional breaks to glare at Professor Snape in a way that boded ill for his next physical. He was strongly considering going to Saint Mungo's instead.

"Dead? I don't see a dead student."

"Here's his outline, Headmaster." Snape pointed at the shadow.

"How novel. I thought only Muggles did that."

"Only in Japan, Headmaster."

"Really? I thought the Peelers outlined people in chalk, too."

"Oh." Snape blushed. "Right. This was Kaylib Drudine. Mister Potter was... um... dueling him. It didn't go well."

"Shouldn't I be getting my report from Gilderoy? This was his affair."

"He's currently having a bit of a lie down, Headmaster. He was most distraught over the state of his robes after Mister Drudine's throat was cut and sprayed him with blood. I think he might have been upset about the dismemberment, too. And maybe my asking that the lad be put out of his misery, come to think of it."

"I think I'm beginning to get an idea of what happened."

"Good, because I really don't want to try and explain it."

"Did Gileroy specify that it was nonlethal? The duel I mean, I gather that what hit Mister Drudine was."

"No, he didn't. Is that important? Not to put too fine a point on it, but this was apparently supposed to be a class in formal dueling. That kind of thing is generally frowned on in professional bouts."

"True, true. But Hogwarts's charter is significantly older than the current crop of duelists. Unless it's specified by the duelist in front of their seconds and the judge, all duels are presumed lethal. Or rather, the charter assumes that the old rules apply."

"There were no seconds."

"Definitely lethal, then."

"Clearly."

"I meant the rules, Severus. Now, is there anything else you needed me for. I was in the middle of a nice dream when I was awoken by a most persistent little Patronus. It insisted that this was some sort of emergency that only I could deal with. It appears that you have it well in hand. Good night."

Snape closed his eyes. "I really should have known better than to pick one of my Slytherins for this."

There was a thump as Dumbledore's right slipper made a lunge for the blood and he fell to the floor.

(A/N John)

This was one of those chapters that I wrote and found things had rather gotten away from me. I enjoyed Dumbledore's response to petrification being a concern about academic achievement. That came from Spoon, who asked why students hadn't needed to repeat years after being petrified in some cases for most of that year.

Also, Dumbledore's slippers. I loved writing those and as that scene went on, they went crazier and crazier.

(A/N 2 John)

And I definitely took some of the idea about Disarming from Harry Potter and the Natural 20, where I recall someone noting that the only difference between a dead wizard and a disarmed one is time elapsed.

(A/N 3 John)

Spoon is feeling well enough that we got a chance to write, although things would have been faster if we hadn't spent so much time laughing about what's coming up for the summer after this year. And Third Year in general. Yeah. We actually have something resembling plans.

(A/N 4 John)

However, given that a few chapters from now, things have already horribly derailed (and this story is pretty much one

giant derailment from the start, so keep that in mind) I have no idea if anything we came up with will hold up. Plus it's a bit messy anyway.

John Out

Detention Explodes! Believe It! (YOUTH!)

Chapter 29: Detention Explodes! Believe It! (YOUTH!)

"Hari?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"You just killed a student."

"And?"

"You just killed a student in front of everyone."

"My father would be so disappointed."

"I should hope so!"

"Lesson after lesson and then I just gut someone with everyone watching me."

"Wait wha-"

"But that's not much worse than everyone knowing you murdered your whole extended family, is it? If everyone knows you did it, does it really matter that they didn't actually see it?"

"No!"

"Thanks, Hermione!" Hari skipped off out a window. No one was surprised that there was no splat. Hari seemed to have a positive genius for finding secret passageways that were disguised as suicide attempts.

"What just happened?"

"Um..." Blaise began. Then he stopped. His mouth opened and closed a few times. "I've got nothing."

"On a separate note," said Daphne, "did Hari just say his father murdered his extended family?"

"Technically, no," replied Tracy.

"True." Pansy was rubbing her face with her hand. "He did, however, strongly imply that this was the case."

"And that his father would be upset with him for killing people in front of witnesses."

"Which rather suggests that the objection is the witnesses, not the killing."

"So Hari is a violent nutter," Millie summed up. "Is anyone surprised?"

"A little, yes," said Daphne. "The violent part, I mean."

Millicent shrugged. "I saw him deck my mom so hard her head smashed the ceiling."

"Oh right."

"I got the feeling he didn't know she would survive when he hit her."

"Oh."

"Natural causes," added Blaise.

Daphne looked at him silently for a moment. "We really need to get you some help."

X

X

The headlines in the *Profit* the next day read, "Scion of Prominent Family Dies to Boy-Who-Lived in Sanctioned Lethal Duel". The body of the article went on to note that the duel was part of the official curriculum (amended ten minutes before publication) and that despite the lack of teaching, Dueling was technically part of the Hogwarts Charter. A good deal of the evidence that this was not some sort of attempt by known wack-a-doodle, Albus Percival Wolfric Brian James Charles Frankie Dumbledore, to kill a member of an important family that frequently opposed his actions in the Wizengamot on the grounds that he was "a daft old coot" and "trying to destroy everything we good Purebloods hold dear, including the keeping of Muggle chattel" (direct quotes from transcripts of the most recent hearings on the use of Compulsion Charms on Muggles for extended periods), was that the two staff members who oversaw the duel were one, Severus Tobias Snape, known Dungeon-Bat, Greasy Bastard, and all-around asshole, who might be in Dumbledore's pocket after being saved from Azkaban by the man, but never acted like it and two, Gilderoy Lockhart, OOM (2nd Class), KOW, JAH, HYE, BUA, LIO, MCW, DHI, JJJ, OIU, SSJ4, HAK and SWQ, a known dueling master and honorable chap. There could be no question that with Gilderoy "Golden Boy" Lockhart involved, that everything was on the up and up.

There were the calls for Dumbledore to resign from his positions on the grounds that someone had died at a school where one of the classes involved poisons, explosives, and corrosive gases and the building itself frequently attacked students and teachers alike. And there was one article mentioning that the Boy-Who-Lived was probably evil or something for having killed, but it was buried somewhere below the adverts for singing corsets and creams that reversed penis-enlargement that had gone too far.

Considering that the facts of the matter were that someone had been gutted, then bisected, then actually atomized in front of the school, the article was rather mellow. It questioned Dumbledore's competence, but no more than usual (each and every day usually had at least one editorial that called on him to step down from one or

more of his positions. So far, it had resulted in a grand total of nothing at all) and parts of the coverage bordered on positive for teaching the ancient art of dueling. And in a shocking twist, one of the most reactionary of the editorial-writers commended Dumbledore for not giving in to the panty-waists of modern thinking and instead continued the traditional methods of dueling instruction, using only lethal combat to weed out the weak (the term used was one that the paper had to redact on the grounds that "mudblood" was insufficiently rude to act as a euphemism for what she had written) and she hoped that there would be further efforts on the Headmaster's part to winnow down the lot of "limp-wristed nancy-boys and [redacted]" that Hogwarts was turning out these days.

Dumbledore seemed to find the whole thing endlessly entertaining and spent the entirety of breakfast slapping his thigh as he read sections aloud despite Professor McGonagall's insistence that the language was too salty for impressionable, young ears. The editorials in particular were filled with an impressive degree of bile and at one point, Dumbledore curtailed his oral recitation when he realized that someone had embedded in the text a ritual to cause the paper to burst into a pile of screaming fire. Hari was suspiciously quiet. The only thing he said to anyone was a comment to Hermione that he was going to have to step things up in order to find "the real one".

X

X

"Hari?"

"Yes, Girl-Tobi?" Hari absently swatted her hand away from the sugar bowl on the Slytherin table.

"You killed someone a few days ago, right?"

"Yep."

"Isn't that bad?"

"Not when I do it."

"Oh." Girl-Tobi's head cocked to the side as she considered that. Then she smiled. "Okay!"

X

X

"Oh lord of Khaos," cried Gred.

"Take pity on humble petitioners," added Gred.

"Ah. What can I do for you two?"

"Just wanted to thank you for dealing with Drudine for us."

"Hm?"

"He'd been talking with Ginny," explained Forge.

"A few times, he cornered her," continued Fred.

"And she never looked like herself after."

"We'd been meaning to make him back off, but we've had limited success."

"Ah. Shame you didn't tell me before I killed him."

"Why?"

"Because then I'd have been able to charge you."

"Oh."

"See you two around." Hari waved and walked up a flight of stairs down to the dungeons.

X

X

Days for Gilderoy Lockhart became distinctly unpleasant. Anything that could go wrong did. His clothes somehow managed to get horribly starched so that he actually crackled when he walked and he'd accidentally cut a student with the crease in his sleeve. His tooth-treatment turned his mouth black and only application of emergency cosmetics managed to prevent him from having to go outside his rooms like that. He kept tripping, too. He sometimes went a whole day unable to walk down a hallway without falling on his face. There was no reason and Madam Pomfrey could find no sign of any curse on him (not that a schoolchild would be able to manage something so complicated) and so he was wondering if there were some new magical disease that was causing his loss of balance.

And then there was his room. Something was wrong with it. He kept slamming into things when he knew that they hadn't been in the way the day before. It was starting to make him wonder if he were insane. And his creams and ointments kept being shuffled around. He always laid them out in a particular order, but he'd found himself applying the wrong tonic a few times. He'd yet to mix up the depilatory and beauty-locks bottles, but it was only a matter of time.

Plus there had been that detention he'd assigned Harry Potter. The staff had been surprised to hear that he expected the boy to show up, but the lad had...

X

X

The door to Lockhart's office opened and the boy walked in. Why didn't he dress like other students? What was with the red clouds?

"Sit! You are going to help write answers to my fan mail."

The boy had blinked for a moment and then nodded and sat down, taking out some sort of stick. For the first time, Potter paid attention as he'd explained the importance of answering letters and how to properly flatter people without promising anything. He'd also expounded at length on the avoidance of being sued for saying things and how touchy the public could get. It had been quite nice to find that the boy was listening to what he said.

Then Potter had silently looked at the stick, which grew a quill-nib and then glanced over his sample letter before opening a stack of fan mail and beginning to work. The first letter was presented for his assessment and he was astounded to find that it was almost a perfect replica of his letter and the handwriting was indistinguishable. After that, he sat down to work on his own pile of the stuff. It was satisfying to enjoy the background hum of himself talking to himself in the portraits around his office, with just the sound of scratching quills.

They had finally finished the letters and Lockhart had asked an Elf to set them aside to be sent out after New Years when people would be especially satisfied to start things off with words from him.

"I'm disappointed in you, Professor," Potter said.

"What?"

"You didn't come to detention."

"What are you—" and then the world had gone white. And red. And hot. When he'd come to, the room had been a shambles; splinters were everywhere and his portraits had been shredded. There had been no sign of the blasted boy.

The worst had come when he'd gone to Dumbledore. Despite his accusations, the man had insisted that Harry Potter was incapable of

such an act because he'd been breaking into the Seventh-Year greenhouses to plant something. At midnight. On a Wednesday.

X

X

"Hari?"

"Pansy."

"As is my solemn duty: Christmas Break starts tomorrow."

"Okay."

"And none of us are going to invite you to our family homes."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Because Blaise's mom sent him a letter inviting me and so did Millie's."

"They decided not to extend their parents' invitations."

"And you can't come to my place anyway," interjected Daphne. "My parents will *not* be happy when I bring Girl-Tob-gah! Astoria-home."

"Why?"

Daphne's eye twitched. Tracy put a hand on her arm. "Shh. Calm thoughts, Daph. He doesn't know."

Hari shrugged and dismissed it as the workings of the female mind. He nodded to Blaise while moving the "maple" syrup (Hari had some serious doubts that it actually came from a tree. He suspected it was "breakfast syrup") out of Girl-Tobi's reach while shoveling some eggs onto her plate. "Eat." He smacked her hand. "Without sweets."

"So this year I actually have Christmas gifts for you guys," said Hari over the sound of Astoria's whining. "You already had sugar and you have Potions and I plan to do a bit of exploring." Girl-Tobi looked down and ate her food sullenly. "Tomorrow evening, you can show your parents your new magic on your sister." Girl-Tobi perked up while Daphne's hand had already gripped a knife and was in the process of throwing when Tracy shoved her wrist down to the table.

X

X

Snape was worried that Potter wasn't in his class. For one thing, Girl-Tobi was making a volatile potion today and he was constantly waiting for the hissing sound that would mean that most of his students would not be bothering him with dunderheaded questions because he'd be in prison and they'd be bothering their maker. The other reason was that this meant that he didn't know where his most troubling student was. Whenever Potter was out of his sight, there was a nagging feeling that something was going to happen that would become his problem.

X

X

Hari tapped Madam Pomfrey on the shoulder. She screamed and whirled, trying to cover the Seventh-Year she had been treating for a... personal problem.

"Are you busy?"

The nurse looked over her shoulder and her patient and then at Hari.
"What do you think?"

"Oh good." Hari grabbed her wrist and dragged her over to one of her workbenches. Behind them were the indignant cries of someone who had a pressing issue that was no longer being treated. "So I

wanted to see if you could work out how to grow any of this." He from his pocket a bit of grayish flesh in the shape of an arm three inches long.

Madam Pomfrey, despite her inclination to return to her duties, drew her wand and prodded the thing. "No, I don't think I can. You should talk to Pomona-Professor Sprout." She paused. "Can I keep this?" She waved her wand a few times. "This was attached to a man without magic for a decade, give or take. Interesting how it bonded with him. It has some properties that I want to study. Maybe it could be fashioned into prosthetics when regeneration is too expensive? Or maybe when dark magic has been used?"

"Go ahead and keep it. I have more. But I'd like to get some fresh that wasn't attached to a creepy grave-robber."

"Madam Pomfrey!" cried the student. "It's moving again!"

"Oh!" she tucked the miniature limb into a pocket and hustled off, brandishing her wand. From behind the curtain came roaring sounds. Hari waved genially and trotted off.

He was halfway to the Greenhouses when he remembered that he'd wanted to ask the medic if possession were a normal thing around these parts. Oh well. It probably wasn't serious.

X

X

The door to the greenhouse slammed open and Hari burst in. His classmates stared at him in open shock. Not, mind, that he was interrupting a class, but that he was in a Herbology class.

"Good morning, Professor Sprout!" Hari shouldered a grinning Theodore Nott aside, causing him to drop the Mandrake he'd been readying to place on a Ravenclaw's shoulder. It hit the ground and began to scream. Everyone stared at Hari, who looked mildly

annoyed that someone had interrupted his interruption of a class, but was otherwise unaffected by the sound that should have caused some serious oculo-aural hemorrhaging.

Hari tried to continue what he'd been saying before realizing that Professor Sprout was wearing earmuffs and wasn't hearing anything. Besides, he couldn't hear himself talk over the noise. Best to fix that. His foot stomped down on the thing's throat and it changed over to terrified gagging and grasping at the ruined not-flesh.

Professor Sprout was vibrating with fury until a miniature arm was held up in front of her. Something about it cut off the thought process of rage. Her wand jabbed the thing and it attempted to swat the intruding object away.

"You can have it if you can help me grow some that isn't tainted by grave-robbing. Let me know." He tucked the arm back in his pocket and left the greenhouse where Terrance Boot was busily performing CPR on a Mandrake.

X

X

The faculty waved to the Hogwarts Express as it chugged its way out of Hogsmeade. Most of them had varying degrees of pleasure on their faces at the fact that for the next two weeks, there would be comparative peace in the castle. The only downside was that there had been a further petrification that morning. It wasn't really a big issue, but it was starting to get a bit silly, they felt.

"I'm going to need to take a short trip into London."

Several Professors jumped, clutching their chests. Snape just shook his head though. Dumbledore nodded amiably. "Of course, my boy. I assume you have some last minute Christmas st-shopping to do?"

"In a manner of speaking, Professor Headmaster." Hari began to jog along the train tracks.

"Headmaster?"

"Yes, Minerva?"

"Shouldn't we ask for a *little* more detail about his plans?"

"Not unless you want to be called as a witness," muttered Snape.

That pretty much killed conversation for the morning.

(A/N John)

This chapter had some bits that I found absolutely hilarious and some that I merely found funny. I adored writing the *Profit* article. And yes, thank you, I am aware that I change how I spell its name randomly.

(A/N 2 John)

I should clarify by reiterating once again that in this story, omake are canon. That may not be true in all our stories, but it is in this one, please stop asking for them to be made canonical.

(A/N 3 John)

I actually laid the groundwork for plot later in the story this chapter. It also successfully derailed my entire plan for the year pretty violently. So yeah.

(A/N 4)

I also enjoy how Snape is totally aware of the facts of life regarding Hari. And the fact that someone was insane enough to teach Hari Great Clone Explosion. I'm betting Deidara learned it just to teach it to Hari.

Tis The Season Of Giving

Chapter 30: 'Tis the Season of Giving... of Headaches and Bleeding Wounds

Hari stopped in at the pet-store and actually purchased things, because somehow it seemed right for this one. Besides, the man behind the counter was just too polite to rob blind. Today. Tomorrow was another matter. Though as a ninja, money was a rather silly thing to bother having, since they rarely *paid* for things. He waved to the nice man and left the door, dodging around a heavily cloaked figure who had three scarves obscuring her face. It might have made it hard to spot her if he hadn't been in possession of the Byakugan. Apparently someone was a senjutsu master in this world.

He had to stop in at a hardware store for several things, then it took some time to track down a box of Turkish Delight in Diagon. It still left a couple of gifts, though. Thankfully, an obscure book he found moldering in the back of a shop answered both problems at once. Though it did mean that most of his day was taken up with sitting in front of an oven.

X

X

Fwoosh

"Not again!" Hermione's father groaned as the ball of fire erupted in his living room on Christmas morning. The boy with the attitude that mixed juvenile delinquent with violent maniac was holding a wrapped gift. Why was he here? "Honey?"

"Yes, dad?" Hermione was eying her friend with suspicion.

"Why is *he* here?"

"It's nice to see you again, Mister and Missus Hermione's Parents," Hari bounded across the room and shook their hands violently, balancing the gift on his head so he could manage both at the same time. "Merry Christmas, Hermione." He paused. "Though I'm not sure what this is about, other than gifts." He held out the heavy tome.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

"Get out." Hermione's father was a little annoyed that someone was intruding on Christmas without so much as a by-your-leave.

Fwoosh!

"Dad?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Is this Winston Churchill's collected speeches?"

"Maybe?"

"Probably not," she concluded. Hermione decided not to weigh her father down with the fact that they were now in possession of the originals of the works in question.

X

X

"Hi Mister Millicent's dad who I never got to meet before!" Hari shook the hand of the large, brutish man cheerfully as he balanced on the man's head with his free hand, having just avoided a drop-kick that had dented the spell-enforced stone floor. He lashed out with his leg and sent the woman who was dressed as a naughty-elf flying across the room, where she shattered a credenza.

"Nice to meet you," replied the man with a certain degree of slowness. In most people, it would have suggested birth defects or being hit in the head a lot. In his case, it was a sign of considerable intelligence compared to his kin. That or he was that rare kind of person who really did think through everything he did very carefully and did everything with a good deal of deliberation.

"Hari?"

"Yes, Millie?" Hari was casually dodging the increasingly violent attacks by his friend's mother.

"Hold still so I can hit you!"

"What are you doing here?" She had to keep from snickering as her mother overbalanced when Hari had abruptly stopped completely and her next swing caused her to land on him. So he tossed her to her husband, who restrained her with a practiced air.

"Giving you your present." Hari had to raise his voice slightly over the hissing and roaring from the blonde who was being easily cradled in such a way that she couldn't manage to get to anything with her flailing limbs.

Hari handed his friend a wrapped object and then vanished in a ball of fire.

Millicent unwrapped the object and blinked because her mother was suddenly next to her, cooing. She held in her hands a cricket bat with nails hammered through it.

"What a thoughtful boy! I like him."

Millicent hit her mother with the bat.

X

X

Hari landed in the middle of a Christmas breakfast. "Good morning, Mister and Missus Daphne-and-Girl-Tobi's parents." He proceeded to accost both adults, shaking their hands vigorously while avoiding the croissant Daphne lobbed at him. "Merry Christmas!"

"Hari!" There was suddenly a small, ballistic blonde wrapped around his waist. He patted the squealing head.

"You didn't say you were coming and I was wondering if you got me anything!"

"She's been like this all morning," snarled Daphne.

Her mother had apparently missed the tone, because she had shifted things around to set a fifth place at the table and was busily moving food onto a plate. Her father, meanwhile was looking at Hari with suspicion.

"I was so glad to be able to help Girl-Tobi adjust after Daphne made her come up to Hogwarts," Hari offered as he sat down and considered the meal, looking to see if there was anything he liked to eat. He speared the sausage link out of the air with a fork and frowned in distaste before depositing it on Girl-Tobi's plate.

"Daphne!" snapped her mother. "You know better than to throw food at the table." Her daughter's twitching seemed to go unnoticed, as she turned to Astoria and smiled. "We're so proud our daughter is already coming along so well with her studies."

"How did you get her by Dumbledore?" her Daphne's father asked, fixing Daphne with his second-best parental glare. He noted his daughter's brightening ears and the fire building in her eyes.

"Dumbledore said she was an early transfer student," Hari explained. "How has your break been, Girl-Tobi?"

"You do know her name is—" began Daphne's father.

"Girl-Tobi, do you want your present?" There was a deafening squeal. "I'll take that as a yes." He whistled and the slightly larger phoenix burst into the air with a pair of boxes. One was as large as an SUV. It had holes poked in it and as it landed, shook slightly. The other was about the size of a book. It landed on Hari's head.

Hari scowled at the bird as it vanished. Then he held out the small box to Astoria. "Here you go, Girl-Tobi." He gestured at the large box. "That's for you, Daphne." The phoenix landed on his shoulder and they vanished.

Astoria tore open her gift with the zeal of the truly hyper. Paper and box went flying in every direction. From the remains, she extracted a little note saying, "*Study*". Then she searched the debris and found a mask made of an orange and red swirl with a hole for her right eye. She put it on immediately and laughed.

Daphne, meanwhile, prodded the box gently with a knife. It shook again. She closed her eyes and hoped that her friend hadn't decided that a nundu would make a good house pet. Then she climbed onto the table and opened the box.

At first, she thought it was empty, then she realized there was a note in the exact center of the bottom.

Practice is its own reward. I expect progress come Term.

P.S. Feed it at least twice a day.

The box was now distressingly empty.

X

X

Tracy Davis was amused to watch Hari appear in a ball of fire and instantly fall to the ground as three magnum rounds went straight through where he had been. The really amusing part was that her

mother then holstered the weapon and apologized for not recognizing him before shooting.

"Good morning, Mister Tracy's father. Good morning, Missus trigger-happy-Tracy's-mother." Hari managed to stand up from his prone position without bending anything. He leaned over to the redhead woman. "On an unrelated note, if you ever want something of a larger calibre, I can arrange that."

There was an audible gulp from the other two as they contemplated the idea of the woman having more dangerous weapons. As it was, she was already at the maximum lethality available on the civilian market-and that only because of prodigious use of magic at the licensing office to convince them that she could have that many guns. The only options left would be military-grade. That was not good for their mellow.

"I was stopping in to wish you lot a Merry Christmas and give Tracy her gift." He pulled a small, flat box from his pocket and dropped it into her lap. He waved to her mother. Then he unsealed his Barret from his forearm and brandished it. "Remember: if you want to up-calibre, I can help you out." The weapon vanished in a cloud of smoke and then Hari vanished in a cloud of fire.

Tracy slowly opened the small gift and her eyes widened slowly. "Holy Merlin."

"I'm still not sure why you don't blaspheme like a normal person," grumbled her mother. "I mean I gave enough goddamn examples. It's not like 'Merlin' is even really blasphemy anyway, it's not like he was a go—" she stopped mid-word when her daughter held up a bracelet of perfectly matched gray pearls.

"I'm going to assume that's impressive?" her father asked.

X

X

A finger tried to stroke Hari's chin the moment he landed and it was only at the last moment that he kept his fist from striking Blaise's mother in retaliation as he dodged.

"I'm so glad you decided to stop in," she purred. "I was so upset when Blaise said you wouldn't be coming by!" she was wearing a housedress that left a good bit to the imagination of people who couldn't see through it. She gestured to a man staring in shock at the boy who had just appeared in a blast of fire. "Please meet my latest husband, Baron Klaus von Stryf."

Hari grabbed the man's unresisting hand and pumped it violently. "Pleasure to meet you, Mister Blaise's Seventh Dad. I'm amazed to see you haven't encountered natural causes yet!"

"We just had the ceremony yesterday," said Circe. "We were waiting to celebrate until after Christmas."

"Makes sense."

The Baron was looking increasingly confused and mildly distressed at the way the conversation was progressing. His new wife patted his hand gently. "I understand you had some experience with them at school recently."

"I suppose." Hari sprawled out on a couch and shrugged. "I usually think of it as business as usual."

"Are we your first stop?" asked Blaise. "As much as mum would like to think you're making a special visit to see her," he glared over at the woman in question, who gave an innocent look that just sat wrong on sensual features, "I assume you're visiting everyone."

"Actually, you're second to last. I pulled names out of a hat." Hari replied.

"Saving Daphne for last, then?"

"Nah. Already got there." Hari looked at the clock against the wall. "I've got another stop to make." He rose and pulled a long box from under his 'robe'. Hari tore the package open and extracted a thin rapier. Then he turned and in a swift movement, speared the Baron through the heart. He drew the blade back and wiped it on the man's jacket. "Sorry about giving you a used gift." He gave Blaise the weapon, hilt-first and then was gone in a ball of fire.

"Such a sweet boy."

Blaise sighed. Then he grinned. "Natural causes?"

"Natural causes."

X

X

"Good afternoon!" Hari landed feet first in the roast pig on the Parkinson's table, sending food bits everywhere. He reached down and grabbed the thoroughly-resisting hands of Pansy's parents and shook them so vigorously that they were lifted nearly out of their seats. "So good to see you again, Mister and Missus Pansy's parents! I'm glad I can count on your undying friendship after saving you from a fate worse than death!"

Pansy had gone horribly pale. Her parents hadn't noticed yet that she was uncontaminated by food. Two years of meals with Hari meant that she was quickly honing her ability to dodge airborne food particles. "Hello, Hari."

"Hey, Pansy." He frowned for a moment. "Don't forget to offer your condolences to Blaise."

"Wha-"

"He just lost his stepfather. Tragic case of natural causes." Hari sat down in a miraculously clean seat and began to help himself to some

grilled trout. "I didn't get a chance to eat yet today, so I'm glad you lot are having a meal." He seemed utterly oblivious to the twin glares coming from across the table. "I've been all over this island, you know. Oh, thanks!" the last was directed at the House Elf who had just given him a bowl of steamed rice.

"I'm already at the point where I won't ask why Mopesy would get you food," mumbled Pansy as she returned to her food, studiously ignoring her parents since they seemed to be in states of apoplectic shock.

"Because she's a good Elf?"

"I suppose. Though I think a good Elf should be able to identify welcome guests."

"Come again?"

"Nothing."

"So, I got you a gift."

"Thanks?"

"You're welcome." Hari pointed over his shoulder. "I left it outside your place. It's not so great for indoors." He rose. "I made sure it's full, so you just need to find someone to teach you to use it properly." He finished eating and rose. "Have fun. If you need a lift to London, send me a note." There was a ball of fire, and then there wasn't a boy-who-annoyed.

Pansy went outside. Sitting there was a gleaming, brand new motorcycle.

X

X

Professor McGonagall had just finished opening her presents when a House Elf appeared with a box. "Mister Hari Potter sends this with his bestest wishes, Professor Kitty."

"I thought I told you to stop calling me that."

"Of course, Deputy Headmistress Kitty."

She sighed and covered her eyes for a moment. Somehow, she had the feeling this was James Potter's revenge for all those detentions. It was just the kind of prank that boy would have found hilarious-the kind where he wouldn't have bothered denying it because he was too busy laughing at his own humor.

"All right. Let's see what he got me this time." Something warned her away from opening the box directly, so she stepped back a few paces. Then she moved back rather further and conjured a block of stone to stand behind. That was better. A few waves of her wand undid the wrapping and then split the seams of the box to let it fall open.

Professor McGonagall's eye began to twitch. Not even James Potter had this kind of cheek. Then she amended her thoughts to realize it had been more that he didn't have the sack-James Potter had been afraid of her anger. His son... his son had bought her a scratching post.

X

X

Professor Headmaster Dumbledore was looking at his opened gifts forlornly; he had opened them and received a great many books he looked forwards to reading, but he had been hoping that young Hari would find some of those marvelous muggle confections. No matter how many times he asked, the boy was frustratingly silent on his source. Still, he had plenty of wonderful things and was grateful for them-

There was a pop and a House Elf holding a small box was standing on his desk. "Hari Potter sends this to Professor Headmaster Many-Names, Professor Headmaster Dumbledore Sir."

The old man snorted back laughter as he took the box and opened it. Inside was what appeared to be a large, thin rectangle of treacle. A note had been attached to the wrapping and Dumbledore picked it up and skimmed it. Then he smiled and tore free a small corner of his gift.

X

X

Professor Snape sipped a cup of black coffee with a few shots of scotch in it. He had always preferred Irish whiskey, but Minerva had caught him once and never let him hear the end of it, so he stuck with her preferred brand nowadays.

A House Elf popped in next to his chair.

"What did Potter get me?"

"Compliments of Ha-how did you know, Professor Wayne?"

"Just a suspicion. And I'm still sure that he got you lot started on that." Snape picked up the giftwrapped book. It was so old that it had begun to crumble before someone applied preservation charms.

"Ye Olde Confekshunr's Guideibooke?" the man had a slight scowl on his face as he opened the book. A note fell out. He read the note and then began to read the book with renewed interest. There was a slight smile on his face.

X

X

Professor Dumbledore had just replaced his usual pointed hat with a multicolored propeller-beanie when Madam Pomfrey stormed into the Great Hall, her usual bustle modulated with radiating anger. The few students who had dragged themselves away from their shiny new toys shrank back; Professor Snape was grateful that he'd had a few extra shots in his current cup of coffee-he couldn't deal with this sober.

Dumbledore cocked his head and gave his mediwitch a smile.

"Headmaster," she snarled. "I just spent the better part of the morning dealing with Christmas gifts!" The look on Dumbledore's face clearly said that he wasn't following why that was a bad thing. "Someone sent Professor Lockhart this!" She threw a box onto the single table that they were eating on, knocking the scrambled eggs about. "It took me an hour just to get his mouth open so I could see why there was blood pouring out."

Everyone looked down at the box. It contained Turkish delight. Each piece had been split open to show that nested inside was a razorblade with a small dot of brown goo stuck to it.

"Say something, Dumbledore!"

The man shrugged and smiled, showing teeth joined together.

"I do believe that Professor Dumbledore is enjoying some Lockjaw Treacle," said Professor Snape. The Headmaster nodded vigorously. Then held up his hands and began to move them oddly. "And he's out of practice using sign-language, so it'll be a while before he says anything at all."

Madam Pomfrey stormed back out.

"I wonder if the same person sent the buffoon the gift sent you yours, Headmaster," murmured Snape. The Headmaster's gestures were not found in any traditional form of sign language, but were clearly dismissive-though of the thought or of that being an issue was hard

to say. When the Headmaster produced a long tube and began to suck up cranberry sauce through it, Snape decided to let the matter drop.

(A/N John)

Here is the much-delayed next chapter. Spoon finally stopped distracting me with random stuff and so I finished writing something.

(A/N 2 John)

Things are only going to get worse for Gilderoy. Trust me on this. Don't feel bad for him yet; you'll use up your give a damn.

(A/N 3)

Hari is getting more comfortable in his relationships and place in the world. Hence being willing to natural cause someone right there in front of Blaise's mother. Besides, it's not like he hasn't already killed people in public.

(A/N 4)

And his gifts to Pansy will only get more like they are.

(A/N 5)

I barely recognize how this year will be ending. This was the lull before the storm breaks again. Really, this was the calm moment. It gets worse next chapter.

That Plot Thread I Mentioned Earlier

Chapter 31: That Plot Thread I Mentioned Earlier

"Hari is going to be the death of me!" hissed Pansy when they had all boarded the train back to school.

"After he offered to arm my mother?" replied Tracy. "I doubt it." Daphne had begun to shudder slightly at the thought of Tracy's mother with anything that Hari thought was a good idea to have.

"He got me a Motorcycle!" snapped Pansy. "And a manual for it!"

"That's incredibly dangerous!" Hermione gasped.

"I know! My parents were seriously considering beating me over it."

"You're too young to dri-oh. Oh wow. That's horrible!"

"It could have been worse," said Pansy. "I mean, they might have actually done it. They tried to destroy the bike, but it kept repairing itself. And every time they locked it up, that crazy Phoenix of Hari's dropped it into the yard again." She sighed. "I'm probably going to have to learn to ride it quickly-I don't want to imagine him helping."

"Why wouldn't you want Hari to help?" squeaked Girl-Tobi. She hadn't taken the mask off since it had been given to her.

"Because then she might get the monster pet that needs to be fed twice a day and that none of us have any idea where it is or why it hasn't eaten what we put out for it and so it's probably starving to death and then we'll need to explain that to him? Or worse, it's found something else to eat."

"Hari got you something other than a note?" asked Hermione.

"Some kind of huge monster, from the size of the box. And it's invisible and doesn't like the food we've left out. Our parents didn't believe us when we said that if Hari said to feed it, we had best do so, which meant they kept complaining about the food bowl."

"But he got you something other than a note!"

"Trade you."

Hermione considered. "No. I think I'm good, thanks. As it is, I'm in possession of stolen property."

"Me too," said Blaise. "Hari gave me a rapier to go with the dagger from last year, and we worked out that it belonged to one of the Kings of England, damned if I remember which one though. And it's really sharp, too. Natural causes." He looked at them. "What?"

"That probably means that his gifts to the rest of us are stolen too, huh?" Tracy looked at the bracelet on her wrist.

"Probably." Hermione said.

Tracy shrugged. "Oh well."

"What do you mean 'oh well'?"

"He killed someone in front of us. What's a little stealing for friends?"

Hermione closed her eyes and began to mutter something about how she had been law-abiding and fell in with a bad crowd.

X

X

Hari wondered about the lateness of the presents that had arrived on his ceiling that morning. Perhaps his visits had derailed their thought processes. He wasn't sure there was another reason for getting the gifts several weeks late.

Hermione had sent him a complete copy of the British legal code with some note about paying attention to it, but he forgot about it almost instantly. Blaise had sent him a copy of the death certificate of his most recent stepfather as well as a copy of the will leaving everything to his mother. Tracy had sent him a rifle-cleaning kit. And a note from her mother asking for a larger calibre of handgun. Millie's gift contained some untainted Turkish Delight and some more tea. Pansy had sent a list of the number of ways her parents had attempted to destroy or hide her gift. Daphne and Girl-Tobi hadn't sent anything, but Hari guessed that they were busy practicing and that was okay. Dumbledore had sent him a book on teaching with a note reading "Sybil said something". Professor McGonagall had sent a detention slip that he forged to apply to Malfoy and dropped on the boy's bed.

X

X

"Welcome back," Dumbledore smiled. "Well, except for Mister Zacharias Smith; he was stupid enough that he managed to get himself petrified between the Entrance Hall and the Great Hall. How he managed to do that in twenty feet is beyond even my considerable wisdom."

"We are glad to have everyone here for lunch, other than Professor Lockhart, who is finishing his recovery after eating a sweet with a razorblade in it. I would like to thank whoever sent it, since that has finally proved that all those parents who worried about such things were right. Thanks."

X

X

The next morning, Gilderoy Lockhart was eating thin porridge, anything else being too much stress for his tongue. The Great Hall was abuzz with chatter when the doors swung open and slammed

into the walls. Standing there were two-dozen Aurors, led by a stately witch with graying red hair.

"Auntie?"

"GILDEROY LOCKHART!" Hari nodded in appreciation; the woman's voice had the appropriate mix of volume and implied threat of things-best-not-thought. "You are under arrest." And that effectively silenced the Great Hall.

The Aurors stormed up the way to the head table and several of them grabbed the man, who had remained seated with his spoon halfway to his mouth, frozen in shock. They started to drag the man away.

"Madam Bones," said Dumbledore, serving himself some scrambled eggs. "Might I ask why you are arresting my Defense Professor?"

"You may."

"Madam Bones."

"He's being arrested for... dear Merlin, what a list. Right at the top is the threat to disembowel the Minister of Magic and I quote 'use your intestines for a condom while I fuck your wife and mistress on your grave'. That one was a pretty good reason on its own, honestly. Then there were the requests that several young girls send him nude pictures of themselves-I assure you that they were not old enough to be thinking of such things. He threatened to blow up someone's house after tying up everyone the person knew and stacking them inside the building like 'cords of firewood'. Then there was the one that exploded, destroying the woman's gown in the middle of a crowded restaurant. She's already got dozens of lewd propositions." Madam Bones covered her eyes for a moment.

"That's all?"

Madam Bones twitched. "No. It isn't. There were almost a score of various threats of rape against everyone the recipient knew, including pets. I think the *Daily Prophet* is running that one on the front page, by the way. Also, I think there was one that was addressed to the Queen that said that if she didn't knight him, he'd do in her family, starting with Diana. And there was the one sent to the Prime Minister, who was most displeased to be getting magical hate mail talking about some recent unpleasantness with a pig in a car and that Mr. Lockhart would reveal to the world the Prime Minister's own interest in barnyard creatures unless he was given a cabinet post. Oh, and I got one also, unsolicited, by the way, that told me that I would be... well, let's just say that I would be unhappy for an extended period followed by graphic and public death. Oh, and it blew up my office five minutes after I had stepped out to gather my troops."

"I see. Well, I guess you'll be taking him to Azkaban, then?"

"Merlin, no! Have you *met* his lawyer? She's insane. He's being removed from positions near children until I can manage to convict his sick ass and *then* I'll put him in Azkaban." She lowered her voice. "But I suspect he's going to trip a *lot* on the way to the Ministry. And he'll try to escape on his way to prison." From outside the great hall was the sound of someone in heavy chains tripping face-first on an even stone floor over and over. "Clumsy bugger, isn't he, Dumbledore?"

"Most lax in his balance skills, indeed."

Madam Bones looked up at the windows. "And that's my cue to leave," she said as a horde of owls came winging in with red envelopes.

"Dear Merlin..." muttered Daphne. She reflexively turned to check what form of chaos Hari was adding to the mess and discovered that he was gone. "Oh no." She looked frantically around the Great Hall as the owls began to land beside Dumbledore. Hari was nowhere to be seen.

Moments later, the Hall became an echo-chamber for some of the most impressively varied filth and bile ever spewed from the average citizen's mouth. Dumbledore had begun to cut a banger into pieces to eat, his conjured earmuffs apparently keeping out all the sound. Professor Sprout had managed to pull out the pair she kept with her at all times since the Mandrakes were getting restless these days, and was staring in horror at the Great Hall.

Most of the students had passed out instantly and Professor Sprout raced from her seat to shift faces out of porridge before students could suffocate. Ron Weasley was bleeding from his ears and unconscious, but his fork and mouth were still moving just fine. Professor Sprout struggled desperately to get Goyle's head out of his plate of scrambled eggs, eventually resorting to a banisher to fling the boy back.

The few students who hadn't been outright felled by the cacophony were bleeding from every facial orifice and trying to stop the sound from doing further damage. The few who could see were not reassured by almost the entire faculty being in a similar state. Except for their Headmaster, who seemed quite unaware of all of this, being busy trying to find an egg that was poached to his satisfaction.

X

X

Hari strolled along a secret passage. Those Aurors had been odd; he'd said hello and offered to hold Lockhart in place so they could have him trip into their boots some more, but they'd gotten all sheepish and hurried out. Freaks.

He admired the way that Lockhart's office was shut tight with spells. The traps they had on the inside of the door were especially nice. He made sure to remember what they looked like as he began to go through the man's desk. There wasn't much there, what with the damage his clone had done, but he was strongly considering planting some evidence, although what he could possibly add after

that set of letters... who was he kidding? Of course he could add more incrimination-Uncle Sasori had trained him well and Uncle Tobi had a positive genius for it. But he didn't really see the point of it. Maybe it would draw the real one out?

No. Lockhart wasn't a target, so this wasn't a matter of insufficient kill; he didn't need to go over the top. Besides, seeing how the man fought this would be interesting. If nothing else, the real one would have to come out of hiding to do the job properly instead of letting the idiot body-double fail at it and get whatever it was they did around here to people who bothered with law enforcement as something other than target practice.

There were the lesson notes the man had, but those were probably best used as lavatory accessories, so he didn't bother. He didn't need transfiguration fodder either. The ruins of the room didn't offer a lot. He considered taking the picture frames, just to tweak the Aurors' noses. Nah. That would be immature. Instead, he wrote 'nice security' on the wall in pig's blood.

Lockhart's chambers, on the other hand... Hari went through more expensive, foppish attire than he had ever wished to see as he pawed over the man's belongings. There were a dozen half-finished manuscripts that he took on principle and there was also the Lockhart Brand solid gold comb that he decided to give to Uncle Kakazu to mess with him. There were also a bunch of high-quality writing supplies. Hari didn't use quills, preferring the anachronistic ballpoint, but he stole them anyway because he knew he should be taking valuables if he didn't want to be lectured by Uncle Kakazu about money and his father about not wasting things.

The man also had an interesting collection of women's underwear. Hari pocketed the lot and finished his work by short-sheeting the bed and setting up a basic shuriken trap at the door.

An hour later, the entire owlry was empty, the residents winging away with multiple stops to make. Each.

X

X

"Potter!"

Hari was sitting on his bed, waiting politely. "Yes, Professor?"

"I do wish you would be asleep so I could wake you up."

"You did, Professor."

Snape paused for a moment and then decided not to get dragged into this. "We have a meeting with the Headmaster."

"At three in the morning?"

"He just informed me that it's my problem. That makes it your problem."

Hari shrugged.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting in front of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. The man was wearing a neon-pink nightshirt and his head-eating nightcap. He raised a spindly arm and began to gesture wildly.

"Professor?" asked Hari.

"I think it's a form of Japanese sign language."

Professor Dumbledore nodded happily and gave a huge smile, showing teeth glued together by lockjaw treacle. He gesticulated again.

"I'm going to say that he is repeating his earlier statement that since Professor Lockhart is currently indisposed, I am to teach Defense in addition to my usual Potions courses." The response of a random

waving of a hand did nothing to enlighten. "Since I don't really want to teach two full course loads, I am faced with a problem."

"Problem, Professor Snape?"

"I am dealing with the result of my policy regarding my problems and your problems."

"Still not following you."

"I'm fairly certain that the mess with the blond moron was somehow your fault. That means that my first instinct is to make you sort it out. The problem is that this would make you temporary Defense professor." Hari cocked his head. "But I will only allow that if you promise that no students will die as a result of your class, under the broadest possible definition of the phrase. And no, that does not mean that just killing them is allowed."

"So you want me to teach them things that don't require actual combat?"

"Come to think of it? Yes."

Hari frowned.

"In deference to my own sanity and my desire to avoid the Board of Governors nailing my hide to a barn door, we are going to give you a month to prepare and severely reducing the number of classes to once every fortnight."

"Alright." Hari considered for a moment. "I'll manage."

"Merlin," muttered Snape. "We're all doomed."

(A/N John)

**So now you all see the beginning of the bad news for Lockhart.
No, I'm not joking about that.**

(A/N 2 John)

See? I told you I had broken with my usual method and actually begun a plot thread early. Don't expect this to be common.

(A/N 3 John)

Except for Lockhart. He keeps managing to have me make plans for him. This is truly insane.

(A/N 4 John)

You'll never guess what it is.

(A/N 5 John)

In other news, Hari teaching is as bad as it sounds. I'm not sure how to explain just how much crazy is packed into the next few chapters. It's pretty damn batpoo.

(A/N 6 John)

Also, Spoon reminded me to ask: I'm looking for swear words in languages other than English. Also long strings of obscenities or rude comments. Please PM a list to us with the language, pronunciation, and translation. We will only use this for good. Honest.

(A/N 1 Spoon)

The more obscure the language the better.

Teaching is Hard on Others

Chapter 32: Teaching is Hard on Others

"Good morning class." Hari was sitting on the desk of the Defense classroom, smiling at the Second Years.

"Hari, quit messing around," snapped Daphne.

Hari grinned. "No joke. I'm filling in for Professor Psycho." Taped to the wall behind him was the cover of the *Daily Prophet* with the headlines detailing Lockharts many crimes. Hari was quite impressed with their detail. Somehow, they had managed to add things that he knew he hadn't written. For one thing, he would have remembered having Lockhart confess to being in charge of the Mafia and the Rotfang Conspiracy. It was funny how when presented with enough apparent facts to satisfy any number of muckrakers, they somehow still managed to decide that they needed to fabricate stuff.

"And who would..." Daphne trailed off. "Dumbledore. Of course."

"Indeed. And today we will be learning about disabling enemies. As those of you who attended the Dueling Club know, a disabled enemy is a dead enemy waiting to happen and a great deal easier to manage than going straight from fighting to corpse."

"What?"

"We are going to discuss the various joints and ligaments that are most vital to combat readiness, with special focus on the ways to break, dislocate, or tear them in ways difficult to heal without potions and overnight treatment. To help with this task, I've brought Allan here." Hari reached behind the desk and drew out a man wearing tattered fatigues in bright orange. There was a dark patch over the man's crotch and down his legs. His beard and hair were unkempt

and he was looking around in horror. "He has happily offered to assist in my demonstrations."

"Please, god, someone help me!" the man began to sob.

"First, a simple method of rendering silence." Hari's hand snapped out into the man's neck and he began to gurgle as his eyes rolled back in his head. "Good. Now, everyone put their books away and gather around."

The class came closer warily, not sure about the man who had begun to have tears run down his face. "So who knows which are the most important joints?" Hari looked around. "No one?" He sighed. "I guess we're starting from scratch." He drew out his tanto from his shoulder and twirled it. "This is the hip-joint..."

X

X

"Albus!"

Professor Dumbledore was eating a toffee when Poppy stormed into his office with a thunderous look on her face. She was brandishing a list whose heading informed that it was the sheet with the names of those who had visited the Hospital Wing. It trailed behind her out the door.

"Yes, Poppy?"

"That... that... GAH! That *person* you have teaching Defense has traumatized the entire student body."

He held out his hand for the list. "Even himself?"

"What?"

"Mister Potter is a member of the student body, therefore I assume that you are saying he has traumatized himself." Dumbledore began

to scan the names.

"Of course he hasn't, Albus! The boy seems to be quite cheerful."

"Well then, I'm sure that you're exaggerating."

"I grant you that Mister Zabini has yet to visit, but that's it. I'm out of Dreamless Sleep and Calming Draught. I've been forced to order more from St. Mungo's and you know how much they charge. And I have Severus brewing them in every class!"

"Well, there's a certain amount of adjustment that needs to be made to a new teaching style..."

"Not that much!"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Do you have someone else in mind who can do the job? I'm not allowed to hire faculty mid-year. It's in the rules the Board of Governors dictated to us. So I need someone who wants to teach for free. Any ideas?"

"Well..."

"Because I don't know of anyone qualified."

"Potter isn't!"

"And neither is anyone else I can think of—Severus notwithstanding—but at least he's convenient and the students won't need to learn a new face so late in the year."

"New... face?"

"Yes. I know that young people can have such trouble with changes to their routines, so I think it best that the new Professor be someone they can already recognize."

"You're missing my point, Albus."

"Perhaps. Do keep me up to date on our Potion stock."

Madame Pomfrey screamed something unintelligible and stomped out, pausing only long enough to kick over Fawkes's stand, sending the squawking bird flying into the fireplace.

X

X

A week and three boring petrifications later, breakfast contained an unusual disturbance. A strange pair entered the Great Hall. The sound of the door opening was lost under the usual chaos of mealtime at Hogwarts which had been amplified several times over by an ongoing feud between Girl-Tobi and Ronald Weasley over who had first dibs on the syrup. While Girl-Tobi's wandless magic was ahead of Ron's wanded skills, he had a distinct advantage in being raised in a house with a half-dozen hellions and a mother who had lungs of brass; he was used to treating what most people would consider shouting as a way to just speak normally to someone next to him-in the case of needing to raise his voice, he could bellow at such volumes that even Girl-Tobi's best efforts couldn't manage to drown him out. It didn't mean he got the syrup, but he at least was able to make his displeasure clear. And sometimes, he just grabbed the thing and started pouring. Things had escalated such that Ron was now waking up early on class-days so that he could beat the absurdly chipper young girl to the table and get a chance at food. There were bets on how soon he would bring a sleeping bag into the Great Hall to try for an ultimate edge. Some people had suggested asking for more syrup from the Elves, but had been told at the decibel levels used for gunfire that the suggestion was a silly one and this was a matter of pride.

Today, Ron had managed enough syrup that he wasn't completely without it for his pancakes, although he had been forced to hold his stack down with one hand while he ate so they would stop floating off. Girl-Tobi was somehow not covered in food, although the immediate area was now sticky and she was messily devouring

waffles today having ceded the pancakes to Ron this time. No one was clear why the House Elves didn't just make more, but some were of the opinion that it was so that the two would fight and make a big mess for the Elves to clean up.

The only people who were close to either of the pair were both occupied also. Neville might have been raised by his grandmother, but he was currently reading a book on Potions that had been recommended by Professor Snape and had donned a pair of earmuffs stolen from the greenhouses to allow him something resembling peace. Because of that, he was eating behind a massive tome and hadn't the slightest clue that someone he knew was there. It was probably just as well, since she would not have recognized him with a book about Potions in front of him and a look of intense interest on his chubby face. The other person was actually in Hospital after taking a book to the back of his head again. Draco Malfoy had been carted off by Crabbe earlier in the meal when Hermione had been trying to convince Hari to maybe spare the First Years the full 'course load' of his teaching style and had been forced to throw a book to get his attention. Not only hadn't it worked, but it had sent the blonde idiot into the strawberries just as he'd been about to take a bite of food. A berry had lodged itself in his throat and although it had been removed before his already pitiable brain could be damaged further, he had been feeling quite unwell and so was resting somewhere that Hermione Granger didn't visit and where he hoped he might avoid being smacked for a few days.

The two swept up to the head table, where they lowered their voices to prevent anyone hearing them. So Hari read their lips.

"Dumbledore," snapped Lucius Malfoy.

"Ah, Lucius." Dumbledore didn't look up from his poached egg. "To what do I owe the visitation at my castle before I have finished breaking my fast?"

"You know why!"

"Because you wish to command me for my stellar fashion sense?" Dumbledore had dissected the egg and somehow moved the liquid yolk to a piece of toast. "Perhaps because you wish to enroll again because you miss the *discipline* of school?" Lucius Malfoy was slowly going pale and managing to purple at the same time. Severus Snape had busied himself with cutting his toast into soldiers so that he didn't show the smirk he had on his face. Minerva McGonagall wasn't even trying.

"You did spend an awful lot of time in detention with me," she put in.

"Please, Minerva, I didn't wish to touch on his deviances, there are children here. I merely thought that the life of a rich man with no responsibilities or duties who doesn't sleep with many women must be lacking in any kind of focus. I fully understand, old boy, that you haven't much interest in the opposite sex-it happens. But you should really find *something* to do with your time in that case. Perhaps you could take up crochet?" Dumbledore had yet to look up, so the statements appeared to be coming from a deer-stalker cap done in eye-watering green and yellow plaid with orange smiley-faces on it. "Maybe you just missed my glowing presence and the warmth of my omnipresent sanity?"

Lucius screamed incoherently for almost a full minute, managing to be heard over the entire hubbub and, as a result, causing complete silence as everyone searched for what had driven Professor Snape up the wall this time and why Hari had done it.

"That's a most unhealthy scream you have," continued Dumbledore. "Perhaps Madame Pomfrey should take a look at you before you leave?" Lucius's companion was feeling quite uncomfortable about the fact that the man was just finishing a primal shriek. "Could you tell me what you are doing here, disturbing my meal in my castle?"

"You're getting the sack, Dumbledore." Augusta Longbottom was dowager of a faded nobility. There weren't really nobles anymore, but if there had been, she would have been matriarch of an important family. She carried herself like a woman of a certain age who had

become comfortable with herself and dressed for practicality rather than beauty. And there was the hat. Most of the students were wondering when she had stolen it from Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry, Augusta?" Dumbledore asked, his voice confused.

"At least for the rest of the year." The woman's tone was suddenly somewhat conciliatory. "I am sorry, Headmaster. There's been too much this time. Your choice of Defense instructors has been called into question-first a... well, there are accusations anyway." Augusta Longbottom might be important, but offending Lockhart's lawyers was just asking for more trouble than she needed. "And now you have a *student* teaching a class. And one who is quite insane, may I add. If even half of what is being said about the class is true..."

Dumbledore looked up. "That is a most interesting point of view, Augusta."

Augusta Longbottom held out a scroll two feet wide and eight inches thick, sealed with the Hogwarts signet. "The papers."

"Alright then." Dumbledore considered the pair, taking the roll of parchment almost absently. "Good day."

"Remember, you deranged old bastard," snarled Lucius Malfoy, "you're out! You're finished! You're finally gone."

"You really look unwell, Lucius," Dumbledore replied as the man was towed away by the Lady Longbottom. "Do have a safe trip home."

When they were gone, Dumbledore looked around at the assembled students. "Get back to eating. You have class five minutes ago. Your Professors will expect you only ten minutes late." He paused. "Why are you still staring?"

"Aren't you sacked?" called out a voice.

"No, Mister Diragid, I am not. But you *do* have a detention for the next week, helping Filch clean the litterboxes for his new kittens." He smiled broadly. "My former students are such jokers. Moody?" A House Elf appeared. For some reason, it had a blue eye that whirled around in its head. "Would you please frame this and put it in the Entrance Hall? I want everyone to see that even the stodgy old bores of our society know how to play a prank on their old Headmaster." Suddenly everyone but Hari felt themselves been pushed into their seats by some unspeakable, oppressive weight. "As if they could really throw me out of my castle." The weight vanished. "And now, off to class."

X

X

-About three weeks ago-

Tobi was walking around the Tower in a pair of towels. One was around his waist, the other was covering his head. "Has anyone seen Tobi's spare mask?"

Itachi looked up from his latest attempt to understand what was supposedly going on in Konoha. Why was there some sort of chaos going on when Uzumaki Naruto wasn't even there anyway? "Why? Do you need it?"

"Tobi's mask is being cleaned. Tobi's mask got bloody when he had to choke a bitch."

"Uh..."

"Tobi squeezed so hard her eyes popped."

"Ah."

"So where is Tobi's mask?"

"I think Hari had it."

"When was that?"

"Before he went back to school. He was packing his seals."

"I'm going to kill him."

Suddenly, Itachi was standing an inch from the man, eyes whirling in seven-pointed stars. "Touch my son and I'll gut you, Madara or not."

"Tobi sticks to pranks."

Itachi's eyes returned to normal Sharingan and he smiled slightly.
"Glad to hear it."

(A/N John)

Alight, my favorite line in this chapter is, without a doubt "Tobi's mask got bloody when he had to choke a bitch". When I wrote it, I was going to delete it-it was just something funny-Spoon made me keep it. I giggle every time I see it, since I hear it in Tobi's voice.

(A/N 2 John)

Gotta admit, I also love Itachi's response of threatening to kill Madara. And that "Madara" is actually afraid of that enough to just prank Hari

(A/N 3 John)

I have taken a short break from dumping on Lockhart. Have no fear, his life will return to misery shortly.

(A/N 4 John)

Also, do not fuck with Dumbledore.

That Plot Thread Strikes Again

Chapter 33: That Plot Thread Strikes Again. As Does the Heir. And Gred and Forge. And the Heir Again.

Things fell into something of a routine for the denizens of Hogwarts, albeit one that had certain random components. Students and staff alike sort of got used to the fact that every few days, a student turned up petrified. In a departure from his earlier position, Dumbledore suggested that if this continued into next year, he would investigate having a study done to evaluate what could be considered as options for assessing what might be valid actions for addressing the matter. Since accidents were down in Potions (most of which Snape credited to having made Neville Longbottom practice) and there were several upper years who were lying in a heap in a storage cupboard while awaiting Makdrake Draught-keeping the usual sources of the more dangerous incidents occupied-overall, it was a safer year than Hogwarts had seen in decades.

No one commented on the fact that there was a giant letter of dismissal hanging in the Entrance Hall, nor that no one from the Board of Governors had actually come by to make sure that Dumbledore had gone. Most people treated it as just another part of life in the castle and moved on to trying to do their homework and get persons of the gender of their interest into broom closets for some study of Anatomy (a course not offered at Hogwarts. Officially) and generally be students.

Defense classes had remained somewhat noteworthy, and every student got used to having gleeful House Elves gather around them as they left the room to collect their gore-smeared robes for cleaning while a small fight broke out over who got to prepare the room for "Mister Kind-and-Good Hari Potter"'s next class. In a way, it became a fact of life. On the other hand, most of the students continued to suffer nightmares of everything from severed limbs to vivisection to

exploding bodies. And then there were the parts of their dreams that were actually memories from class.

Hari demonstrated a positive genius for coming up with new minutia to teach. Even the older years were being forced to learn. In their cases, it was less a matter of new spells and more learning to apply them in what Hari considered to be "proper" manners. Hari also had temporarily changed the name of the class to "Aggressive Defense Against the Dark Arts" on the grounds that the best defense was a corpse for an opponent.

Things kept slipping his mind, though. He kept getting distracted before he got around to asking questions.

Around Easter, messages began to crop up on the walls, written in a variety of different bloods. They caused some comment at first, but after a while, they got to be boring. The author seemed to be getting increasingly frustrated at the lack of fear in the castle, judging from the ever more erratic writing. In time, they would have become blasé on their own, but Fred and Fred decided to get in on the fun using bright, dayglow colors. Soon, there were messages on the wall calling for the underthings of the ladies of the castle to bedeck the suits of armor and threats that if treacle were not offered as pudding, that the sky would be green forevermore. And then they decided to indulge themselves and get crazy.

It escalated quickly, too. By the end of April, the Great Hall had been completely covered in graffiti several layers deep with warring threats of dire horrors to come and that the Muffin King was riding forth to attack the Biscuits of Bruges and lay siege to the home of the Mad Wizard of Twinkle. No one was sure how the artists had managed to deface even the ceiling so that there was "skywriting" overhead calling for terror at the might of the Heir and calling everyone who read it a stupid wanker for having read it. Everyone thought that the whole thing had come to a head when the two sides decided to work on different places. The Entrance Hall was soaked in blood, which would have worried people, but everyone figured that someone had used the blood from Hari's classes (the Elves couldn't

manage to clean it *all*, right?) from floor to ceiling. That same morning, the outside of the Astronomy Tower was painted as a giant penis with a long poem glorifying the female form in general and the naughty bits in particular with reference to a selection of vulgarities and suggestions for acts normally not discussed in polite company along with a complete set of footnotes (three feet high) citing the books and pages where pictures of everything described could be found in the library, which led to Madam Pince closing it for an extended period until the staff were able to get across to the male half of the student body that the books in question didn't really exist.

Fred and George did a brisk trade in postcards for some time after, though.

It turned out that everyone had been wrong. Things really came to a head over the week after. While the library was closed to prevent horny adolescents from rampaging through in a search for mythical books (Fred and Fred maintained that they were actually suggestions for books that should be added to the school's collection) the Heir took to stunning random students and writing messages on them. Unfortunately, the Heir had reckoned without the twins' need to outdo everyone. Three days after that facial writing began, the entirety of Hufflepuff was ambushed by two masked individuals with red hair who finished each others' sentences and who proceeded to cover each student with part of an obscene limerick that could only be read by having all the students stand in the correct order (which Dumbledore had them do in front of the Great Hall so everyone could see).

No one was able to identify the authors of the poem.

X

X

The trial of Gilderoy Lockhart began in March. As a result of this, Dumbledore had to spend a good bit of time away from the castle. Not only was this the sort of high-profile case that the Chief Warlock

was expected to oversee, but he was one of only a handful of members who weren't being called as complaining witnesses and might, therefore, be something vaguely resembling impartial. Lucius Malfoy kept trying to ask what Dumbledore was doing when not presiding, but after Dumbledore began to reply to each instance of the question with 'your wife', adding a lewd pelvic-thrust, Malfoy stopped.

Madam Bones had spared no expense on the overtime, it seemed, since her Aurors had turned up a truly impressive pile of evidence and more witnesses that could be easily fit into a magically expanded space. As a result, the prosecution's case went on for day after day as the head of the DMLE, in her role as Prosecution for the Crown, laid letter after letter before the four who were hearing the case, seeing as they were the only ones left for a panel normally consisting of seven to thirteen. It took her almost a whole week just to depose the various members of the Wizengamot who had either received letters personally or whose close family had gotten a "Lockhart Special". And then there were the panties returned from the man's collection...

Hari read the accounts by stealing Draco Malfoy's paper and ignoring the subsequent complaints at the top of a weedling voice. It was with amusement that he discovered that it was not only the paper that was making things up. He was nearly certain that Madam Bones was a bit too zealous in the discharge of her duties, because he knew full well he hadn't written some of those letters that were being offered as evidence. There was an open letter in the paper from the Queen asking that the sender of the letter to her bed with an owl pellet as a pillow-mint be buried so deeply under the law that by the time he or she was found, that person had long since withered to dust. It was noted by the editors that the wording had been heavily modified to prevent shock by coarse, Muggle language. Apparently a second letter had been sent to Madam Bones offering any assistance the Queen's Magical Bench needed, but had been politely informed that the DMLE was already about as invested as it could get, given that the Director had received one of those letters.

There were rumors that the Queen and Madam Bones were pen pals now.

It was probably a bad sign that Lockhart's lawyer seemed to have given up even suing the newspaper for some of the more inflammatory articles published calling for, at the least, the slow execution of the once-golden darling of the press. On the other hand, it might have been because it would have tied up a good-sized firm of barristers for decades just to file all the court papers, given the sheer number of things to sue over.

The trial dragged on and on, taking far longer than it should have. The prosecution seemed to be taking a positive delight in drawing things out. It was long gone Easter before the prosecution finished with the salacious details of the various letters and move on to a series of increasingly serious and vast crimes. Hari had thought that it was some sort of strange April Fool's prank at first, but quickly realized that Madam Bones was in fact charging Lockhart with everything she could think of. He suspected the Queen's hand in it. The reason he'd thought that it was some sort of prank was that Lockhart was being charged with robbing the British Museum of several interesting pieces, including a rapier and a collection of papers from its vaults.

Over the following days, more charges surfaced. Lockhart was charged with being involved in a conspiracy to embarrass an official of Her Majesty's Government by use of a toupeed, porcine saboteur, a massive traffic jam resulting in deaths throughout the major London metropolitan area, bringing a Muggle into Diagon Alley, the ongoing abduction of Muggle prisoners, and the deaths of three random people who fell off a bridge. For the next month, the charges grew more and more elaborate. Lockhart was accused of being involved in the kidnapping of Patty Hurst, the deaths of all of the Kennedys (including those still alive), the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa and Amelia Airheart, the destruction of the Hindenburg, the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, the Opium Wars, the Gunpowder Plot, the death of King Charles II and Mary, Queen of

Scotts, the sinking of the Titanic, the mysterious deaths of several prostitutes in Whitechapel, blackmailing a Bohemian King, killing a man on a train headed east very quickly, the disappearance of the Lindberg Baby, the bombing of Dresden, running a crime ring out of an exclusive London hotel, the invention of penicillin, leading the Light Brigade (and the Heavy Brigade), the British Invasion, wasting good tea by tossing it into a dirty harbor while wearing a silly outfit, domestication of *gallus domesticus*, enameling an avian statue belonging to the Hospitalers of the Knights of Saint John, the loss of thirteen valuable colonies, the moon landing, stealing firearms from an armory, the invention of roleplaying games, the Watergate break-in, the massacre at the Alamo, Gettysburg, the American Civil War, the English Civil War, the death of Jean d'Arc, the Hundred Years War, the theft of the Sphinx's nose, the crash of the American stock market, the crash of the American stock market, the Chicago fire, Prohibition, Women's Suffrage, moonshine, the fall of Troy, the burning of Alexandria, the burning of Alexandria, the burning of Alexandria, the Tower of Babel, the sinking of a castle into a swamp, the sinking of a castle into a swamp, the building of a castle on top of two sunken castles, the Big Bang, the leaning tower of Pisa, the separating of Pangea, Tiananmen Square, lies, damn lies, statistics, fooling a royal into going nude, Sputnik, the USSR, modern art, postmodern art, the sale of the Eifel Tower, the sale of the Eifel Tower, the October Revolution, yellow fever, disco, hippies, driving drunk, importation of opium poppies, the kidnapping of Fay Wray, the death of Kurt Cobain, pineapple on pizza, lite beer, Typhoid Mary, Original Sin, theft of Fire from the gods, and the Queen's recent headcold.

X

X

Things went a bit sideways and citron-shaped on the third of May. Hari had taken the morning off to collect some volunteers for his last two classes of the year. While he was out, he had let the air out of the tires of every vehicle in Buckingham Palace, made Big Ben run

an hour fast, and held up London traffic for ten minutes at lunchtime. He was eagerly awaiting Madam Bones asking to un-rest her case so that she could begin the process of adding further charges. Since the Defense had so far mounted the defense of "fuck it, he's guilty" there was a good chance her request would be granted.

X

X

"Daphne?"

"Yes, Hari?" Daphne was finally getting more sleep as the threat of Astoria had made sure she practiced regularly. These days, she was managing to finish spells first and, as a result, her door stayed locked. Because of her increased sleep, she was now treating Hari with more polite-distance than outright attempts at violence.

"Where's Girl-Tobi?"

Daphne looked around. "No idea. Why do you... where did he go?"

X

X

"Gred, Gred?"

"Yes-"

"Hari?"

"Have you seen Girl-Tobi?"

"Not recently," said Forge.

"Not since she went to have a chat with our sister," added Fred.

"Did you see the new bit of graffiti?... where'd he go?"

X

X

Tom Riddle paced angrily back and forth. This had been a frustrating year. Never mind getting the stupid girl to do anything-why wasn't anyone taking this seriously? He'd put dozens of people into... storage cupboards (what was with *that*, anyway?) and no one cared. Why did no one respond when he'd painted the Entrance Hall with blood? That should have caused *some* comment.

And why hadn't anyone died? Sure, it had taken a few tries last time, but now... and at least in his day someone had *cared* that there had been attacks. Sure, no one really *worried*, but they'd taken notice! Now? Now there was at least one student whose petrification hadn't even been mentioned! Not even in dismissive terms! No one seemed to care that the boy was even missing. There wasn't a note to the family or anything! What the hell!

How hard was it to get some school-children to at least *pay attention!* He'd have liked a *little* fear, but he'd have settled for something other than the Astronomy Tower becoming a giant phallic effigy. For some reason, that had been more noteworthy.

And now Harry Potter wasn't even being properly heroic. Tom wasn't so sure about that one, though. Despite the attestations of the girl in his diary, what he'd managed to read from between the lines said that the boy wasn't even anything like she thought. But he didn't believe most of what she wrote, since she seemed to think that Dumbledore was allowing a student to teach. And that the student was gutting people as part of class.

Still, the boy should be down here by now. He'd taken one of Potter's friends to ensure that the boy would show up. Of course, he wouldn't blame Potter for leaving her here, since she was only mercifully silent now because he'd knocked her out. What was keeping-

Tom's pacing was interrupted by smacking into someone as he turned around.

"Hi!"

(A/N John)

I cannot describe just how much fun bits of this chapter were to write. Things have taken a turn for the severely cracked. Things will probably calm and then get worse (I say, having written the next several chapters already)

(A/N 2 John)

And that damn plot thread I created in my madness continues to go off the rails. I'm not sure where I expect it to end up will be quite as funny, but it amused me when I thought of it.

(A/N 3 John)

The reason for that thing was that all of you wanted to see Lockhart's detention with Hari. I'd totally ignored it, but since everyone wanted to see it, I stuck it into a chapter I'd been ready to publish. Then I realized that I had just opened Pandora's box. Several planned threads went out the window and I was stuck with this mess. I think it worked out pretty well.

(A/N 4 John)

Perhaps the most fun was trying to think of charges for Lockhart. I think it was somewhere around 83 counts. It was pretty silly. Spoon suggested the headcold.

(A/N 5 John)

Oh, right, also, the war of graffiti between the twins and the Heir. That was hilarious for me. I loved the twins' various

responses to terror. Especially their work on the Astronomy Tower. That *will* be mentioned again, have no fear.

(A/N 1 Spoon)

This chapter has been edited to include an idea one of our reviewers, catears had given us. So thank you, catears, for the suggestion to write on people.

Showdown in the Chamber of Secrets

Chapter 34: Showdown in the Chamber of Secrets

Dumbledore sat behind his desk. Rather, he lounged, leaning back with his hands clasped over his stomach in some parody of a satisfied, fat man. Behind his spectacles, he stared vacuously at the man on the other side of the stretch of wood. He had been harangued for the better part of half an hour and was slowly reaching the point where he was running out of gobstones moves in his head and he didn't want to have to move on to the Hogwarts accounting, so he might cut the man off soon.

Lucius Malfoy was well passed flushed and was now heading from dark red to purple in his fury. His normally perfect hair was wildly out of place as he screamed at a man who was infuriatingly calm. The fact that the old bastard was somehow apparently senile enough to stare off into space without apparent comprehension just made it worse.

"I'm sorry, Lucius, I do believe I may have missed that last bit."

"Which last bit?"

"Since you walked in."

"GAH!"

"So why are you here?"

"GAAAH!"

"I assume it has to do with my missing student? Because one missing student is really not worth coming here about it."

There was a grinding noise and both men looked at a bookshelf that had moved. So had the wall behind it, swinging inwards and

dumping the books on the floor in the process. Standing in the secret passageway were Hari Potter with Girl-Tobi over his shoulder and a small redhead mostly hiding behind the boy.

Dumbledore blinked a few times. He had *not* known about that passage into his office. "Well, since it appears that my missing student has been found," he gestured at the three people. "That's cleared up. Thank you for visiting, Lucius. Do see yourself out."

"YOU WERE SACKED!"

"Funny thing, that," Dumbledore smiled genially. "I had a word with members of the board and every single one of them said that you blackmailed them into that vote."

Lucius's face stayed its purpling hue, but was slowly shifting from contorted anger to outright confusion. "I what?"

"I went and visited them and they all agreed you had threatened their families. Most reprehensible."

Lucius blinked. His face was starting to lose the coloring as he got sidelined. "What?"

Hari snapped his fingers. "That reminds me!" He looked at Dumbledore. "Is possession by dark spirits normal around here?"

Dumbledore's face took on a serious look as things shifted focus too quickly for him to continue looking absent-minded. "What? Oh. No, not really. Why?"

"Because one of the Weasleys was being possessed by a dark spirit out of a journal that he gave her." Hari gestured at Lucius Malfoy, who had gone suddenly pale.

"I'm sorry?" asked Dumbledore. "What journal?" He looked up. "Where did Lucius go?" His office door was open and there was the sound of footsteps racing down the moving staircase.

Hari pointed at the door. "That way."

"Thank you."

"Happy to help."

"Now, what was this about a journal?" He had a look of mild interest on his face.

Hari tossed a plain, black book onto Dumbledore's desk and walked into the office-proper. The wall swung shut behind him, leaving the bookcase where it stood in a pile of scattered texts.

The man opened it to the first page and his eyes widened slightly.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Um... Hi, Professor Dumbledore," said a sheepish, high-pitched voice from behind Hari.

X

X

Arthur and Molly Weasley were sitting in Dumbledore's office. They hadn't been here since they had been students and been caught repeatedly violating curfew. Technically, they had been violating other things as well, but those weren't quite as firmly against school rules. It was strange for them to be here now, although both privately suspected that it was because their twins had finally managed to do something so monumentally insane that the Headmaster had been forced to address it directly. Even Molly's older brothers hadn't managed that feat, but their lads were making a good effort to replace those two-or at least make everyone remember them more fondly by making their antics seem tamer by comparison.

Dumbledore walked in and settled himself behind his desk. "I'm sure you are wondering why you are here. In fact, I would wager that you

expect that I am about to tell you that two of your children are about to be expelled or at least face serious discipline matters"

"I don't like how that sounds," said Arthur.

"And you probably shouldn't. I'll start with the good news: the twins are not in trouble. Although I would request that next time that they decide to paint the Anatomy Tower as a giant penis, that they use materials harder to remove so I do not have to listen to upset House Elves about how easy it was to clean up."

"What?" Molly's voice hadn't risen, but her face had taken on a thunderous quality.

"I have to admit that their poems about female anatomy were quite lost on me, but I'm told they were quite erotic."

"What."

"And I was thoroughly impressed with their work on transposition so that when Aurora was walking up or down the stairs of the Anatomy tower, the castle's entire supply of rice pudding was heated to about ninety-eight degrees and then launched from the top in a geyser."

"WHAT?"

"So all in all, I have to say that they're doing quite well. And even then, I have to applaud them for having engaged in a prank war with Voldemort." He sighed as the two flinched and then flinched more as they registered what he said. "Or, rather, a shade of him possessing a student."

"Um... Headmaster..." began Arthur, uncertainly.

"Which rather brings me to the reason I called you here." Dumbledore rubbed his face for a moment. "For once, I find myself a bit at a loss. So I guess I'll just say it outright. Your daughter wrote in a cursed diary."

Molly paled and Arthur covered his face with his hands.

"Unfortunately, we didn't find out in time." Dumbledore ignored the beginnings of sobs. "Thankfully, one of our students was able to end the process before young Ginerva was completely annihilated." He paused. "But I'm not sure there's a good way to explain the rest. Tom!"

"Um... hi?" a familiar girl waved from her seat off to the side. The Weasleys had been so distracted they had missed her, having expected to see the twins and simply glossed over anything that didn't fit that.

"Ginny!" Molly dove at the girl and wrapped her in a deathhug.

"Not exactly," managed the girl as she was smothered.

"What?"

"Molly, if you would sit down?" Dumbledore looked very tired. "Thank you. Let me introduce you to Tom Marvolo Riddle. I should say that this is the new and rather improved version." The girl flushed a little and looked down sheepishly. "And now I will let... um... her explain."

"Uhh..." she looked around helplessly. "I'm Tom Marvolo Riddle. And a bit of Ginny Weasley. I have her memories and a bit of her personality, but when the transfer was stopped, there was more me in here than her." Molly's face was impressive in that it managed to be both scarlet with rage and alabaster pale in horror. "I'm pretty sure it can't be undone," Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I'm really sorry about this."

"Why did you do this?" asked Arthur.

"Well, I used to be a really bad person. Like budding dark lord bad." 'Ginny' scratched her cheek. "But somehow I got to see that I was on a bad path and want to stop." A pause. "It's a lot more complicated

than that, but I really don't know how to explain having a major change of heart because someone stared at me."

"What?"

"Like I said, I don't get it either. But being angry seems like it was a lot of work." Another pause. "But judging from what I know of Ginny, I seem to have adopted her moral compass. Somehow it feels like a fitting middle ground."

Arthur blinked. He wobbled Molly, who was staring straight ahead, unmoving. "Umm... may I have a few minutes with my wife?"

"Just stay out of broom cupboards, Arthur; those are reserved for students and staff."

Arthur blinked and then towed his wife from the room.

X

X

The Weasleys returned to the office to see Dumbledore with a gigantic book open on his desk and the person who had been Ginny reading over his shoulder. The man was muttering to himself as he went down columns of text. "Possession by a dark lord, attempted possession by a dark lord, possession by a light lord-wasn't that a mess?-attempted possession by a lord of somewhere in between... no, I don't think we've ever had a possession by a dark lord and reforming to a moderately good person at the same time."

"That's actually rather surprising," said the girl who, Arthur noticed, had red, glowing eyes. He wasn't sure how he'd missed that earlier. "I mean, given the number of crazy things that happened here over the years..."

"We'll be keeping her. Him. Um..." Arthur scratched his head.

"Come again?" asked Dumbledore.

"Ginny. Er. Tom. Can I get a bit of help here?"

"There's some of our daughter in there," explained Molly. "And... well, we'll see how it goes over the summer at least."

The redheaded girl blinked. "Um. Oh. Okay then." A pause. "I've never had a place to go over the summer, so that should be new. Eep!" The last was because a sad-looking Molly Weasley had scooped Tom-Ginny up and was hugging him-her.

"But I do insist that we get this name and gender thing sorted out," said Arthur. "I'm really not going to keep guessing what to say."

"Well, I'd like to keep the bookkeeping simple," said Dumbledore. "So I insist that legally, the name and gender remain the same." He looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "But we're going to have to do something about the dorm situation."

"But I'm not sure I want to be Ginny Weasley."

"Do what Professor Headmaster does," said Hari from the windowsill. Everyone jumped. Hari leaned to the side to avoid the bolt of dangerous energy from the young redhead's fingers. "Just be Ginerva Tam Riddle Weasley. It's still fewer than he uses."

"Heh. Sorry about that." The newly minted Tam said. She was looking at her smoking hand. "Bad habits die hard and I was never good at being surprised."

"Don't worry, dear," said Molly. "My twins will have you broken of the habit by the end of the summer."

"I'll remind them to duck," sighed Arthur.

"They're used to it with Ginny," replied Molly. "To tell the truth, the only difference is that you didn't just try to animate their snot."

"I didn't try to *what*?"

"I think you should take young Miss Riddle home early for the year. There's a good bit left to term, but I know that young Miss Riddle knows all of the First Year material, doesn't she?"

"Yes, Headmaster."

"So that will give me almost five months to work out how we're going to house her next year."

"If it helps, Headmaster, I'm pretty sure I'm asexual."

"It doesn't. This is the kind of thing that the board of governors would rightly be upset by if I manage it wrong. Besides, I want to make sure no one is uncomfortable and I doubt you'll want to think of yourself as a normal twelve-year-old girl."

"True."

"Good. Molly, Arthur, please get her home and used to life in a family that actually *likes* each other. It should be a good experience."

X

X

After May, things continued slightly calmer-because Fred and Gred decided that with no one writing on the walls, it wasn't as much fun (that hadn't stopped them from writing the name and cup size of every girl from Third Year and up on the walls of every bathroom). On the other hand, the "Trial of the Century" was in recess for two weeks to allow the *Daily Prophet* to conduct sufficient legal commentary on the case (which mostly boiled down to "he's obviously guilty") and for the continued violation of the Statutes of Secrecy for continuing to use magic to kidnap prisoners from Muggle prisons charge to get updated. He was also charged with several juvenile pranks on the general British population and causing the Queen to have a headache.

Dumbledore was quoted as a crackpot old coot and all-around madman of the nuttiest calibre for suggesting that it might just be possible that Lockhart wasn't guilty of crimes committed after incarceration, seeing as how the Aurors were skilled enough to prevent a man literally unable to move his limbs with the number of chains on them from going anywhere, let alone managing spectacular feats of magic.

Madam Bones, on the other hand, was quoted as the valiant defender of truth and integrity in the pursuit of justice for saying that the only reason she wasn't pushing for Lockhart to be Kissed was because she was pushing for execution and that it would be wasted. She also hoped that the idiot in charge of the court could see passed his forgive-everyone complex and convict the blatantly guilty monster of all charges, especially those he had managed after being arrested, as they were clearly dark magic.

The day exams were set to begin, Dumbledore cheerfully announced that there were no exams this year. He admonished everyone to keep studying for the next week despite the lack of anyone checking on them and that they should all stay out of broom cupboards since the Prefects weren't going to be patrolling.

X

X

"Hari?"

"Yes, Daphne?"

They were sitting in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, headed back to London. Hermione had her head buried in a book and was still muttering uncomplimentary things about Dumbledore for the lack of finals. Pansy was reading a book on motorcycle maintenance in an attempt to be able to learn to ride before Hari got involved. Blaise was chatting with Tracy about precious gems (something his mother had a vested interest in) and Millicent was

reading the *Daily Profit* which had the headline "LOCKHART GUILTY. NO ONE SHOCKED" and the story detailed how he had fallen from grace so horribly and was being taken to maximum security for execution in the morning. Girl-Tobi was elsewhere in the train, judging from the shrieks of not-glee.

"I've been meaning to ask. What did you get me for Christmas?"

"Hm? Oh. I got you a note."

"What else?"

"What else?"

"There was a huge box."

"Yes?"

"And it had breathing holes cut out of it."

"Yes?"

"And you left me a note to feed it twice a day."

"Yes?"

"What was it?"

"What was what?"

"What was the note about?"

"I wanted to make sure you didn't forget to feed Girl-Tobi."

"You... what?"

"She needs to eat. She's a growing girl."

"And the breathing holes?"

"Made the package lighter."

"ARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRGH!"

"I guess you forgot to feed her?" Hari absently blocked her attempt to strangle him, dumping her in Blaise's lap.

"Hello, Daphne. Are you feeling alright? Okay then..." he had grabbed her arm and held her so she didn't embarrass herself trying to attack Hari again. Hari took a nap.

X

X

"I'll drop in before school," promised Hari.

"Please don't," answered his friends.

"See you then." Hari vanished from the platform in a swoosh of fire.

Aurors came storming onto the platform. "Everyone maintain an orderly exit. We're on the lookout for a highly dangerous escapee from Azkaban!"

X

X

-About six weeks ago-

"Itachi."

Itachi looked up from a report detailing an increase in the solvency of brothels in Hot Water Country. He was trying to decide if there were just a bunch of nobles on vacation, or if it might mean something useful.

"Yes, Leader-Sama?"

"I... You..." The orange-haired man shook himself. "Come with me."

Itachi shrugged and followed.

"Tell me, Itachi," said Pein. "What is that?"

"It appears to be a giant snake filling your office."

"Indeed it is, Itachi. Why is it there?"

"I have no idea. Perhaps Tobi knows?"

Pein twitched. "I already asked him. Besides, please note the insufferable red pigeon sitting on it looking smug."

"I see it, Leader-Sama."

"I suspect, therefore, that your son is responsible for my *entire office* now being unusable."

"Just a question here, Leader-Sama: since you already know what it is and why it is there, what do you need from me?"

"Itachi?"

"Yes, Leader-Sama?"

"Do not piss me off."

"Have you tried talking to it?"

"What?"

"You can speak to snakes, right?"

"... I forgot about that. But it's unconscious anyway. That was the other reason I suspected Hari; someone hit it hard enough to knock it out but not kill it. Who else would do that and then send it to me?"

"A good question, Leader-Sama. I recommend talking to it when it wakes up. I have paperwork to do, do you mind if I go? It seems to be stirring."

"Hey, Pein!" Kakuzu walked into the room. "I have a ques-"

(A/N John)

Since everyone wanted to see the epic battle, I figured I should at least give you a little false hope (Spoon's words). Yeah, I had never planned to show the fight, so at least I didn't get rid of it just to mess with people (which would be a waste).

(A/N 2 John)

And yes, I had planned for quite some time that Tom would get stuck in Ginny because Hari wanted to make sure he hadn't done anything to Astoria. And just figured it would be interesting to try Kotoamatsukami on her.

(A/N 3 John)

Alright, so it's mostly that I found the idea amusing.

(A/N 4 John)

If you wonder why Hari doesn't use Kotoamatsukami on things more often, there are two reasons: the first is that it's not something he was raised having, so it's just not his instinct to use it (especially since he was raised solving problems with explosions or other aggressively violent attacks). The other is that it would be a boring story. That's probably more important.

(A/N 5 John)

And because I can go extended periods while forgetting that he has it. Or even that he has the Byakugan at this point.

When Someone Looks a Basilisk in the Eye

Chapter 35: When Someone Looks a Basilisk in the Eyes...

... Where Do You Bury the Survivors?

"Hi dad!" Itachi looked up at his son, who was standing on the windowsill, looking cheerful.

"Hey, Hari. You may want to avoid Kakuzu for a bit."

"Why?"

"The snake you sent killed his Lightning heart again."

Hari snapped his fingers. "That reminds me!" He ran off into the Tower. "UNCLE PEIN! I NEED TO TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT THE SNAKE!"

Itachi rubbed his face slowly and then rose and began heading to the meeting hall to head off Kakuzu.

X

X

"Uncle Pein?"

"Yes?" snarled the orange-haired man as he did paperwork on his lap. His desk was still covered in scorch marks.

"I wanted to tell you that the snake I sent you can kill with a look." Pein twitched. Then he glared at the heat-chicken on his desk, which he felt sure was laughing at him. "Can you come to the meeting room? I have gifts!" Hari ran out of the room and absently ducked under a fireball his uncle threw at him.

"I'm going to give you such a *beating*, you brat!" A spear of wind flew from Hari's hands. "GODSDAMNIT!"

X

X

Kakuzu was still grumbling about needing *another* Lightning heart when the Akatsuki gathered in the meeting area to find out what Hari had brought back from his time abroad. Hari himself was bouncing on his toes, holding a pile of boxes. "Here you go Uncle Kakuzu, Uncle Hidan, Uncle Zetsu." Hari had dodged Kakuzu's halfhearted attempt to cuff him in the head. "Uncle Tobi... cream filling?" The last remark was because Tobi had plucked a pie from nowhere and smooshed it into Hari's face. It probably would have done more than that, but Hari had begun dodging early and so mostly got pie everywhere. "Tasty. Uncle Kisame, Aunt Konan, Uncle Pein, Uncle Deidara." He paused. "Dad." He turned to the redhead. "You'll be sharing with Uncle Zetsu."

"Let's see what you got me, brat," grumbled Kisame. He opened the small box and frowned when a sharp bark came out. "You didn't get me a dog." Kisame lifted a puppy made mostly of dewy eyes from the box and glared as it produced a tongue from somewhere and licked his palm. "You got me a dog."

"Nope!" Hari smiled.

Kisame looked at the thing which had begun to bark happily. "You sure?" He poked it and it licked his finger. "I'm pretty sure this is a dog."

"It's a Crup!"

"Is that why it has two tails?"

"Yep."

"So you got me a dog."

"No. It's a Crup."

"It's a dog."

"It's magical."

"It's a dog."

"It'll go with your kneazle."

"My what? Oh. Right. The kitten." A furred head poked up from the back of Kisame's collar and mewed. "Damn it, I told you to stay hidden around here!" The cheerful mew drew a scowl.

Zetsu unwrapped what appeared to be a training dummy with a tree growing out of its head. "Hey! It looks just like daddy!" Then it started to scream. All the ninja grumbled until the black half of Zetsu cold-cocked the thing in the face, sending it to the ground. He then proceeded to stomp on its throat until it stopped making noise.

"Uncle Sasori," said Hari, "you should try seeing if it would make good puppets."

"Uh... okay?"

"As long as you leave the head planted in good soil, it'll grow back."

"Okay then." Sasori looked a little concerned about this concept. Living wood people were normal for him, planting them and cutting off the grown parts? Not so much.

Tobi was holding something and glaring at it. It was mask-shaped inside its wrapping. "You got me my own..." he trailed off as the paper fell to the floor. "Monster mask."

"Of course it's yours," Hari replied. "I got it for you."

Tobi held up a rubbery Frankenstein's monster mask. "This is not my mask."

"Yes it is."

"Gah!" Tobi threw the mask down. "Where is my spare mask?" He roared.

"I needed it."

"You *what*?"

"I had to give a gift."

Tobi just stared in silence for almost a minute as everyone watched. Then he stormed out of the room, cursing.

"Why isn't he like that normally, yeah?" Deidara asked. From somewhere in the tower, there came the sounds of rippling explosions and increasingly high-pitched shrieks of various curses in new and inventive litanies.

Pein shrugged. "I should probably do something about that before he wrecks my tower." There was an incoherent bellow of rage. "When he's a little calmer."

"Let's see what you got me, yeah." Deidara pulled away the wrapping, deciding to ignore the fact that the world was shifting suddenly (primarily on the grounds that sudden shifts in the world were like explosions, and those were good, yeah). Inside was a large box labeled "Ammonium-Nitrate/Fuel-Oil Handle With Care". "What's this stuff, yeah?"

"I'll show you how it works later, Uncle Deidara." When Pein wasn't looking, Hari moved his hands apart suddenly and mouthed 'BIIIIIG boom' to Deidara.

Kakuzu was staring at a comb larger than his hand made of solid gold. "Where did you get this?"

"The previous Defense teacher."

"Is it even usable?"

"No idea." Hari paused. "Probably. It's not like hair is particularly hard."

"I... someone made a *solid gold comb* . I could kill someone by throwing this. Why would someone make this?"

"Dunno. I'm guessing the answer is something along the lines of 'because', Uncle Kakuzu."

"That sounds distressingly possible."

"What the hell is *this* ?" Hidan was holding a box bearing the legend "Victoria's Secret. Angel Show."

"I got them for you."

"Why would you get me panties?" Hidan had pulled out a lacey black thong. "Do I look like I wear panties?" He gave a delicate sniff. "*Used* panties."

"I thought it would go well with Aunt Konan's favorite pair in your sock drawer."

Hidan barely had time to go paler than usual before he was blown through the wall by a stream of explosive tags. The barrage continued to fire at him as he fell, raining explosions on the crater at the base of the Tower as Konan screamed in fury. She eventually stopped and sighed. "I needed that." She flung a few more tags down, just as the few operable bits of Hidan were collecting themselves, and then went to open her gift.

"What did you-" She slammed the lid shut, her face scorching red. The air around her head was rippling with distinct heat-haze. Then she slowly opened it slightly and looked inside again before

slamming it shut once more, looking like someone had given subcutaneous injections of tomato juice.

"Do you like them?"

" *Why is one of them covered in spikes ?*"

"It's based on the book in your favorite pile."

Konan made an 'eep' sound.

"Can I see-ow!" Pein had been leaning over, and reeled back, clutching his forehead where a paper shuriken had speared his skull.
"Okay then, not going to ask."

"You got your gift already, Uncle Pein. I punched it in the face for you."

"I'm aware."

"Your Animal Path now has a fun new toy."

"Yeah my..." Pein coughed. "I'll be right back." He left the room. On his way downstairs, there was the sound of fireballs being thrown and suddenly cut off, along with a cessation of cursing (except from the bits of Hidan currently belaboring Kakuzu to come down and put him back together).

Itachi had been unwrapping his gift and looked down at a poorly made mug with "World's Best -" on it. The line had "bab" etched over it by someone whose grasp of spelling was matched only by a lack of skill at engraving. "Thanks, son."

"I thought it would go well with your shirt!"

"Yes, it will." Itachi punched Kisame in the face when the shark-man didn't stop snickering. There was a thump as the huge swordsman landed on the remains of Hidan, followed by cursing. And an angry "mew!" Then more cursing.

Konan shuffled out of the room with her box, trying to pretend it wasn't there.

"Hari?"

"Yes, Uncle Deidara?"

"Is now a good time?"

"Sure!"

X

X

"Dad? I got something for Uncle Sasuke. Think I should mail it to Leaf? Or deliver it in person?"

"In person, it'll get you out of the Tower while Leader-Sama calms down. There's just one thing..."

Hari sat on Itachi's bed. "Yeah?"

"Your uncle... well..."

"Is he dead? Because it's not fair; I wanted to kill him!"

Itachi sighed and rubbed his face. "No. He left Leaf for Sound. I wanted him to stay in Leaf. It's important that he not go missing-nin and besides I wanted him safe... Hari?" Itachi looked around at the empty room. "Hn."

X

X

Uchiha Sasuke was practicing with a sword when something hugged him from behind. "Hi, Uncle Sasuke. Dad says 'Hn'." Then the world went dark.

X

X

Hari strolled through Sound's lab-complex with his Uncle over his shoulder. Sometimes he had to stop someone and interrogate him or her to check what exactly the various rooms were (the Byakugan was a wonderful tool, but it would have helped if people had labeled things). Then he usually let the person go. Or cut a head off. Whichever.

It took a good bit of time to find something that sounded appropriately worth further investigation. He noted absently the snake-man running through the complex, searching each room thoroughly and screaming at people he passed. Hari wondered what that was about.

X

X

"Old lady?"

Tsunade's head turned, ready to punch Naruto in the face (while wondering what her brat was doing back early). Instead, she found a boy wearing an Akatsuki robe sitting on her windowsill. The boy's hair obscured half his face, but the visible half was pale and she couldn't help noticing the whirling Sharingan eye staring at her.

"Hey, Old Lady? Do you know where the Hokage is?"

She was having some trouble responding to this. It was too sudden for her to process that someone wasn't up on the times and thought someone else was Hokage. She recalled seeing something about this in the notes on the explosion a year ago. Someone matching this rough description had been waving a severed arm and running through the streets, hadn't he? She really needed a drink.

"Well, when you see the Hokage, would you tell him to keep a better eye on my Uncle this time?" A dark shape was tossed onto her desk. It was only the sudden realization that it was her missing Uchiha that stayed her hand as it was about to punch him into paste. "Cool. See you." The freakish boy was gone and one of her ANBU came bursting in the door.

"Hokage! That boy had a Byakugan!"

Tsunade sighed. The bound and gagged boy on her desk made noises that sounded rather rude, so she flicked him on the forehead for his language absently and then rubbed her eyes. "Get me Inoichi and a medical team. Someone write a letter telling our esteemed Head of the Uchiha Pro Tem that the *actual* Head has turned up and, as a result, I will not be entertaining his request to have Leaf's official dish changed to noodles-with-broth-in. Oh. And someone tell Shizune that I've decided to get off the wagon and she should get me a fuck-ton of booze before I go to a bar to get it myself." She paused. "Why did he call me old? I mean," she squeezed her assets, "I have my illusion up and running." She noticed a little drop of blood on Sasuke's nose. "And someone tell my apprentice that Sasuke is back." There was a whimper. "You broke her heart, you can explain to her." More whimpering. "Suck it up." Why did the Uchiha have a ball-gag in his mouth? That rope-work looked like... "WHERE'S MY BOOZE!"

X

X

"Hey dad! Hi, Uncle Pein!"

"Hari?" Pein spoke with a certain wariness to his voice. That might have been because his best friend had been distinctly touchy for a few days and, judging from the abrupt mood swing and return to 'normal', his theoretical superior was having some kind of breakdown. Also, Deidara had gleefully managed to use most of a metric ton of ANFO before Pein had managed to catch up to the Mad

Bomber of Stone and take the rest off of him. "Where have you been?"

"Sound. Then Leaf."

"Alright. Alright. That's good." Pein was adopting the tone of one who is dealing with the hard-of-thinking or someone being deliberately obtuse (or, maybe just an Uchiha). "Why?"

"Well, I needed to get Uncle Sasuke back to Leaf, so I had to get him from Sound."

"Of course." Pein rubbed his face for a moment. "I should have known. It's so obvious, after all. Did you blow up anything?"

"No?"

"In Leaf."

"Definitely not."

"How are you so sure?" asked Pein, a man aware that Hari had only melee-combat and large-scale chakra attacks.

"All I did was drop off Uncle Sasuke."

"Drop *who* off?" asked Kisame as he walked into the briefing room.

"Uncle Sasuke."

"That's what I thought you said. Isn't he in Sound?"

"Not anymore."

"If I may?" Pein interjected, "might I ask what qualifies as 'drop off' in your mind?"

"I had already tied up Uncle Sasuke the way I learned from Aunt Konan's books," Pein had covered his face and moaned as Kisame

started snickering and Itachi sighed and rubbed his eyes. "So he wasn't saying much through the ball-gag," Kisame began to gasp for air.

Hidan walked into the room. "I heard someone say 'ball-gag'?"

Kisame pointed at Hari. "He... he... he tied up Itachi's little brother like a gay-fetish doll!"

Hidan covered his mouth and managed to be out of the room before the gales of laughter echoed through the Tower.

"Hari?" said Pein, "would you please finish?"

"And so I tossed him onto the Hokage's desk and asked the old lady there to let the Hokage know I was returning Uncle Sasuke and please keep a better eye on him this time."

"Did..." Pein began and stopped. "What did she look like?"

"Um..." Hari frowned. "Tallish, good muscles, blonde hair. Lots of wrinkles and sagging breasts." Pein relaxed; there were plenty of retired ninja who could qualify. "And she had some illusion up and a concentration of chakra on her forehead." And there went his mellow.

"Um... Hari? Did you... uh... did you *call* her 'old lady'?"

"Well yeah. She was one."

Kisame fell to the floor, clutching his sides. Itachi had ceased rubbing his eyes and was just staring into space. Pein was looking into the distance with the face of a man trying to gauge whether a major military power was about to declare war.

Konan poked her head in. "Why was Hidan lying in the hallway laughing before I kicked him in the balls?" she asked in the tone of someone who was still working out her anger.

"Hari... Hari..." Kisame struggled for air. "Hari kidnaped his 'Uncle Sasuke' and... and delivered him tied up with a... with a... with a ball-gag in his mouth because... he learned from... from your books!"

Konan went brilliantly red and fled. Kisame looked sad he hadn't gotten a chance to tell her about Hari calling one of the Sages an old lady.

There was something that Pein had been meaning to ask and this seemed like a good time-it would let him think about something other than the absurd number of S-Class ninja in Leaf (seriously: aside from the Akatsuki and Leaf, who had more than two on staff?) coming by to explain their displeasure. "Hari?"

"Yes, Uncle Pein?"

"What's that mark on your neck?"

"Prototype Curse Mark."

"Ah. Of course."

Itachi blinked. "Wait. What?" Itachi grabbed Hari, ignoring the attempt to dodge without noticing. "Curse Mark?"

"Yeah. I got it when I was in Sound."

"I figured. Did..." Itachi didn't want to ask, but he had to know. "Did Orochimaru touch you?"

"Did who touch me?"

"Pale man, black hair. Likes snakes?"

"I think I saw him. He was a few levels away and shouting at people," Hari said. "I'm not sure why he seemed so excited while I was going through the labs."

"So not from a bite?"

"The mark? No. I put it on from a scroll."

"I see."

"Yeah." Hari's neck itched slightly where the six curled lines had formed a sort of star.

"Hari?"

"Yes, Uncle Pein?"

"Why do you have a bunch of scrolls on your back?"

"I wanted to have the notes with me so I can make it work properly."

"I see. Why didn't you just memorize them?"

"I was busy. I figured I'd look at them later."

"Not too busy to grab an experimental Curse Mark, though?"

"Of course not."

"Right, right. I shouldn't have asked. Does it work?"

"Not yet. I'm planning to fix it."

"Fix it..." Pein's voice was flat.

"Yeah. I'm already taking Runes and Arithmancy this year, so it should be doable."

"Leader-Sama?"

"Yes, Itachi?"

"Could you have the Human Path to come here a moment?"

"Okay..."

Itachi hadn't let go of Hari, who was torn between hugging his father and being annoyed that he was being treated like a child. When the Human Path entered the room, Hari was held out like an offering.
"Check to make sure there aren't any... passengers."

The Human Path poked the mark on Hari's neck. "Nope. Nothing here." It trotted out.

Itachi put his son down; it was then that he noticed something that he'd overlooked while worried about his son's health. "Why are you heavier?"

Hari held a leg out, showing orange leg-warmers around his shins, then demonstrated similar objects on his wrists and across his torso.
"I'm having to work really hard to move like this."

"I see. Just wondering here: how did you get them?"

"I picked them up in Leaf."

Itachi closed his eyes in silent prayer. "While you were out, did you make any other acquisitions?"

"I got a book for Aunt Konan."

"Oh gods," muttered Itachi.

"And I helped do a little tidying up around the place."

"I'm not going to ask. I feel certain I will learn of it sooner or later."

"Alright." Hari slowly made his way out of the room.

X

X

-Just a Short While Ago: Leaf-

WHAM

"Lee!" Haruno Sakura knew that the boy was pretty much indestructible, but it was hard not to worry when he had gone from jogging along at his steady (fast) pace to accelerating through Leaf's exterior wall and then into the memorial stone. She was somehow less worried that her former teacher had been then struck by the combination of Lee and stone at terminal velocity. That was probably because the man had already dusted himself off and was frantically patting his pockets with ever-increasing urgency.

Lee, on the other hand, was also hauling himself up, but looked horrible. His face burned as he saw Sakura and realized he'd just acted like a complete fool in front of her.

"Lee?"

"Yes, Sakura-chan?" he asked in a subdued version of his usual shout.

"Where are your weights?"

"Right here, Sakura-cha..." Lee broke off as he actually looked at his limbs and noticed a distinct lack of weights. "Um... GAI-SENSEI!"

There was a crack of the sound barrier snapping and then Gai stood in the spot occupied by the memorial stone. "Youth!" (What is wrong, my honest-not-at-all-favorite student? I could sense your distress from across the village and made my way here as quickly as possible so that I might aid you.)

"Youth!" Cried Lee, plaintively. (My most honorable teacher, I have lost my prized weights, which you gave to me when I declared my intent to prove that I could be a successful ninja without chakra. I have failed you in their loss and dishonored you in failing.)

"Youth!" (My dear student, I understand your worry, but perhaps the solution is simple? Have you tried looking where you last had them?)

Lee looked at his ankles. "Youth!" (Yes.)

"Youth!" (Oh. That is much more worrying. Let me consider what must be done... I think that in this instance, we are forced to concede that we cannot remedy this vexing issue on our own and must go to the leader of our fair village, that she might have a greater understanding of matters and bequeath to us what knowledge we lack so that we can solve this mystery. Come, Kakashi, you should come with us.)

Kakashi was still patting his pockets desperately and didn't seem to be paying attention as the two Green Beasts made their way to the Hokage Tower, towing him along. Sakura was left standing in the field, trying to work out what she had just missed.

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When the two (and Kakashi, who now had sweat running down his face as he went through his pockets) got to the Hokage's office, they found a very annoyed looking Ibiki and an ANBU wearing a spider-mask who gave no sign of being frustrated, but there was somehow a sensation of great displeasure. The Hokage was sitting at her mound of sake bottles-there was probably a desk under there somewhere-and had just pulled the cork out of a bottle with her teeth and taken a great swig.

"Run that by me again. I think I'm about drunk enough." She said, voice as steady as ever.

"I came back from lunch and found that every last door in T&I didn't squeak." Ibiki's tone implied that this was a concern. It made sense, given that a squeaky door made it that much more difficult to sneak

around if someone were trying to escape. "Someone had oiled the hinges."

"You think that's bad?" there was an undercurrent of fury in the ANBU's voice. "My squad was the first back from patrol, so we found out first. Someone had swapped around the underwear in everyone's lockers! And then we found out that whoever had done that also left poison ivy oil on all of the stuff, too!"

"So you're telling me that my entire commando unit is commando now?" asked Tsunade, her eyes clear. She tossed the now-empty jug behind her and got to work on the next.

"Yes, Hokage-sama." The ANBU was distinctly aware that she was in the presence of the man who had been her captain and was relieved and worried to find that he was now looking downcast if not outright despondent instead of looking perverse.

Tsunade sighed. "What's wrong, Kakashi?"

"Someone..." Kakashi seemed to be having trouble wrapping his head around the concept. "Someone stole my limited edition, personally signed copy of Icha Icha One!"

"Worrying, I guess, but-

"It was in my pocket!"

"Okay then. I will regret this, I'm sure, but... Gai, what brings you and your green mini-clone?"

"Youth!"

"So that the rest of us can understand, Gai."

"My apologies. Someone stole Lee's weights."

"I'm going to take a wild guess and say he was wearing them."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." Pause. "On a related note, I must report that the memorial stone needs to be reseated."

"Why?"

"When his weights went missing, Lee went through the wall and into it." Another pause. "You might want to have someone fix the wall, too."

"What a novel idea."

"I am most sorry, Hokage-sama!"

At that moment, Shizune came bursting through the door.

"And what new, minor-but-still-worrying emergency are *you* reporting?" asked Tsunade, apparently bored as she took another drought of sake.

"When Uchiha Sasuke was brought to a room in the hospital, there was a gift on his bed, waiting for him!"

"I'm guessing it all can be traced back to an incident last year. Gai, do you recall fighting Itachi?"

"You mean that miserable, no-good, vile, dirty, rotten, despicable, monstrous-"

"Actually, I was referring to the young boy who kept calling him 'dad', Gai. You might remember it, since I read in the report you wrote about how he was waving, and I'm quoting here-some things stick in the mind- 'a severed arm with Sharingan implanted in it and saying he'd killed Shimura Danzo.'"

"Ah, yes," Gai said gravely. "The unfortunate product of the Uchiha program of forced incest."

"Or something," replied Tsunade, sober as a judge.

(A/N John)

So, this is late because I was busy and then sick. I'm feeling better now, so we will hopefully return to a similar writing schedule. I'm not quite as far ahead as usual. I'm working on that, too.

(A/N 2 John)

This was one of my favorite chapters in terms of sheer number of things I find hilarious. On the other hand, it was pretty darn silly.

(A/N 3 John)

There will be fallout from this. Trust me.

(A/N 4 John)

Tsunade has a legendary alcohol tolerance as far as I'm concerned. She drinks in the hopes that some of the buzz will actually take effect.

(A/N 5 John)

The omake came about because I was imagining what other mildly annoying but somehow horribly worrying things Hari could do to violate security without doing real damage.

(A/N 6 John)

I should mention that the line about spikes is Spoon's fault. The line about where Hari got the idea is mine.

John Out

Training With Kabuto

Chapter 36: Training With Kabuto

or

My Spleen Is Supposed To Be Inside

Uchiha Sasuke was unhappy. There were plenty of reasons for this, but somehow, they managed to link up to his brother. It wasn't that his brother was the cause of all bad things, just that these seemed to be his fault, since all of them were because of his nephew, and therefore his brother. What was worse was that his brother was only partially at fault, so in the end, it was the whole clan that had made his life difficult.

A year ago, he'd been approached by some of the strangest freaks of nature he'd ever encountered, and he lived in a village with Maito Gai. They had informed him that if he wanted to make use of the... tattoo (he tried not to think about a fifty-year-old biting him and cooing about it any more than he had to) on his neck, he would need to come with them to the creepy pervert's place to learn from him. Since his best friend and adopted cousin was set to head out of the village anyway-to be trained by one of the Sages, no less-Sasuke had decided that he'd kill two genin with one shuriken and learn from Orochimaru (while carefully avoiding any... advances).

Not being stupid, he'd decided to confide in his friend that he (Sasuke) was going to be "betraying" the village in the morning and he (Naruto) should be ready to deal with that and that he (Naruto) would be acting head of the clan until he (Sasuke) got back. He (Sasuke) had started clarifying that bit about whom he (Sasuke) referred when Naruto started getting really confused. In his (Naruto's) defense, it was a fair thing to get lost on.

It had been awkward to deal with Sakura on his way out, though. He couldn't explain that he wasn't *really* leaving for good, so he'd been disturbed when she'd asked to come along. That had annoyed him enough that he'd kicked her very hard somewhere rather rude and knocked her out in the middle of the street. With any luck, it would teach her not to betray the village.

Sasuke hadn't seen what had happened during the hunt to catch him, but from what the Sound Four had explained, Jiroubu had managed to catch the entire retrieval team in some sort of rock formation which Naruto had responded to by pulling so much chakra out that the Sound ninja had been forced to abandon the technique and make a break for it. After that, reports got rather confused.

Sasuke had failed to enlighten his new "friends" on the abilities of his fellow Uchiha, so they had been left trying to explain the thousand Naruto that had overrun the forest looking for them. To Sasuke's amusement, it had done nothing to convince Sound that Naruto was a threat, since the clones mostly got in each other's way and managed to prevent any of the Leaf ninja getting anywhere near the Sound Four. He'd known his friend was a good actor, but this had been utterly ridiculous-Sasuke was amazed at how Naruto managed to perfectly sell the utter incompetence *and* completely prevent a single casualty. No one even twisted an ankle.

It had been a bit weird, though, when he'd been watching the tail end, since he'd been doing it while standing at the top of the Uchiha Madara statue in the Valley of the End. Actually, what had been weird was that his eyes had stung like hell and he'd had giant hands on his back. They hadn't even been useful hands, though gliding was kind of cool-but he'd have preferred ones that could form hand seals or hold things.

Then had come the mixture of frustrations upon discovering that most of his instruction would come from Kabuto and upon discovering that Kabuto had plenty to teach. The boy was horribly emotionless and somehow cheerful at the same time, all the while demonstrating a broad variety of ways to maim and kill those of

nominally greater skill. His instructor also had what could best be described as an insane idea of how to learn stealth techniques: Kabuto had ordered him to ambush Orochimaru.

It took almost a day to understand that Kabuto was serious about the matter and only ten seconds to understand how much it hurt. The other thing about Kabuto was that he had some freakishly good skills at certain parts of medical techniques. He spent quite a lot of time that first month healing Sasuke's various internal organs after they had been shredded by a Sage who wasn't good at being surprised. Unfortunately, Kabuto's skills didn't include pain management.

On the rare occasions that he paid much attention, Orochimaru was a capable teacher, but Sasuke always wondered if the man was focused on lessons or on... well... Sasuke. It was creepy. Especially talking about his body. But the man was brilliant in a sort of razor-sharp way and gave ample proof that he had genuinely been a contender for Hokage-if it hadn't been for the whole creepy-pervert-megalomaniac thing.

Sasuke had been amused when Kabuto had actually been shocked by a change in wardrobe. Having decided that the Uchiha as they had been were insane and generally unpleasant, Sasuke had decided that things like pointless, stubborn pride weren't so useful (although given that he'd brought Naruto into the clan, there was a good chance that was going to stay a family trait) and so he'd exchanged the purple and white garb that he'd been provided with for an outfit made of black and dark orange. He knew only one person who seemed to treat infiltration against highly skilled assassins as a form of recreation to prevent boredom and had adopted his best friend's method for avoiding detection.

That hadn't been enough to actually *surprise* Orochimaru, but it was enough that Kabuto was pleased with his progress and had focused more heavily on all the wonderful ways to inflict horrible injuries on other people. Sasuke wasn't sure where Kabuto had learned, but they were obviously crazy, since the boy's idea of teaching was to grievously wound Sasuke and then heal him and have him try to do it

back. Thanks to the Sharingan, it was working (and sometimes, he even dodged) but it was still painful as hell and probably a bad sign that this was considered an acceptable training technique in Sound.

The Sound Four were a perpetual thorn in his side. He couldn't stand a single one of them. They all had serious problems (and this was Sasuke saying it). And they had somehow taken it as a personal offense that he was trained by Kabuto and Orochimaru (who refused to explain why he continued to employ four annoying pests as his elite bodyguard when Kabuto and Kimimaro would make better choices) and generally didn't like him. He was forced to put up with Not-Choji's complaints, Not-Aburame's chattering attempts at backhanded humor, Not-Kiba's attempts to give him orders, and Makes-Me-Long-For-Sakura's profanity filled rants and violent assaults (although it was nice that in Sound he was allowed to just stab her if she tried to hit him). He had enjoyed the look on her face when he'd accused her of being 'hot and cold'.

Kaguya Kimimaro had been a great help in his medical training by acting as a dummy for some of the more esoteric instruction—that was to say: the things that Kabuto didn't teach him by horribly maiming him repeatedly until he could replicate the healing technique being demonstrated on some random missing-nin who'd had the misfortune of being near wherever it was Kabuto looked for the poor bastards.

Sasuke had been trying to get Kabuto to reveal who had trained him, since he planned to do the world a favor and kill the crazy fuck before anyone else was so scarred by this training method. Actually, Sasuke had been planning to kill quite a few people in Sound, too—Kabuto was somewhere at the top of that.

Then he'd been training (on his own for once. Kabuto had been doing *something* and Sasuke really didn't want to know what that boy considered important) and he'd heard that voice just as his Sharingan showed him that in a second, he would be unconscious and before he had a chance to dodge, he was. He had vague memories of bouncing on a shoulder through some of the labs he'd

been ordered to stay out of on pain of whatever Kabuto could come up with. Since Sasuke had a pretty good idea of what that crazy bastard could come up with...

The next thing he was certain of was lying on the desk of Tsunade, being stared at in confusion. And there was something in his mouth and the ropes tying him felt *really* uncomfortable. He thought he was going to die when the owner of that voice... was that his nephew?- told Tsunade to tell the Hokage that Sasuke was back. Dear gods, he was expecting to be turned into a smear on the mountains outside.

Everything became a blur for a while, probably out of protection for his mind by keeping him from remembering Sakura-but he remembered that there was a gift on his bed in the hospital. It was some sort of sturdy fabric outfit and a note from his nephew saying that he (Sasuke) should wear it so no one killed him before he (his nephew) was allowed to-which his father (Itachi) was sure to approve of any day.

The worst part was that now he was being attacked by piles of paperwork that Naruto had been in charge of as Head of the Uchiha. He got the feeling that this was supposed to be a punishment-he personally felt that having Sakura as his nurse was much more unpleasant. The girl took far too much enjoyment in doing regular checkups every hour. And he had yet to hear back about his complaint that full-body checks were not necessary at each of these. If he found her attractive, this might qualify as a pleasant experience, but he just didn't find the girl attractive. (If pressed, he'd have dithered on what he *did* find attractive, since his exposure to pretty girls was rather limited in Sound, where everyone was a freak, but he'd probably name that instructor from the exams-except that she clearly had a bit of a snakey-feel to her and he didn't really want anything like Orochimaru near his groin)

How Naruto had kept on top of... of course that lucky bastard tossed Shadow Clones around like they were party favors. His best friend and adopted cousin was infuriatingly able to deal with all of this crap.

And from what Tsunade had said to him when she visited, Naruto had single-handedly, and from outside the village, done more to annoy pretty much everyone who needed annoying than anyone ever had. Tsunade was almost gleeful about some of the things Uchiha Naruto had managed. On the other hand, her litany of complaints about some of the laws Naruto kept proposing... (they pretty much all had to do with broth-with-noodles-in)

Kakashi had been aggravating as well, with his admonishments about abandoning Leaf. It wasn't as though Sasuke could have told anyone the truth and not had it get back to Orochimaru. Besides, he was learning a lot from Kabuto (and Orochimaru on those rare times he could be bothered to help teach). And there was no way he wanted to deal with running the Uchiha until Naruto was back and could officially be adjutant.

After trying to sneak up on Orochimaru, a couple of ANBU wasn't really much of a challenge, all things considered...

-OUT TAKE-

==The Guest Instructors==

"Class," said Hari, apparently unaware of the giant man with blue skin and gills standing next to him. "Today, we have a guest instructor."

Kisame bowed slightly. "I am Hoshigake Kisame, former member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist and current member of the terrorist organization known as the Akatsuki." He paused when Hari elbowed him in the side. "Oh, right. My name is Kisame Hoshigake. Freaks."

The Seventh-Years blinked.

"I'm told you lot are an IGUANA-level class, so I don't need to take it easy on you." Kisame looked at Hari. "Why can't they be normal

things. Like ANBU?" The blue man turned back to the group. "What do you want, waving-hand-boy?" He pointed at a muggleborn at the back of the room, using Samehada with the same casual ease that most teachers use a ruler.

"Do you perform alternative music with things like PVC pipes and stuff?"

Kisame blinked for a moment. Then he walked down the aisle of desks, picked up the boy absently and began to leave the room. "We're having class by the lake. Chop chop."

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"Today," said Dumbledore, "I want to thank our guest instructor, Professor Kisame Hoshigake, for his demonstration of advanced water techniques. I'm sure we were all impressed by the entire lake leaping up as a gigantic shark and eating the giant squid. Except for Hagrid, who I really hope will stop complaining soon.

"On a similar note, I want to thank Ms. Jessup for her demonstration of the useful muggle technique of mouth-to-mouth in reviving her classmate after he was held underwater by our guest for almost three minutes for asking a stupid question.

"Also, I did not know Acromantula were possible to shred with just sharkskin. I'm not sure this new method will catch on, but it was a fascinating study. Please don't come back."

(A/N John)

This is one of those chapters that just sort of happened. I knew I needed some stuff, so I started and then it got a bit weird.

(A/N 2 John)

Definitely enjoyed doing the outtake, which I remind everyone is not-canonical.

(A/N 3 John)

That is my final word on that subject.

(A/N 4 John)

On the subject of Sakura: I understand that there are people who dislike her with an intensity rarely rivaled outside of otaku culture. I can fathom this in regards to pre-time skip when she's utterly useless. Afterwards? Not so much. This is the girl who punched a goddess in the face.

You're not required to like her. You might not want someone to end up wither her. Whatever. Just keep in mind that she makes Tsunade look like an amateur. Oh, and *she punched a god in the face* !

(A/N 5 John)

Since I saw it come up: Hari will not be ending up with Luna. If there are pairings-and believe me when I say I'm not sure about that still-Luna will not be involved. I don't mind her, but her crazy does not fit Hari's.

Luna is challenged with *re* ality, Hari just has no conception of *mor* ality. That is all.

John Out

He Has Spies!

Chapter 37: He Has Spies!

"Hari." Pein walked onto the training field, idly watching his adoptive nephew bouncing around with weights approved by Maito Gai. The boy seemed to be taking a positive delight in throwing multiple A-rank techniques at the surrounding grassland (which was rapidly turning into a wasteland) and generally indulging in wanton destruction.

"Yes, Uncle Pein?" Hari had just finished seeing what happened if he threw Intelligent Hard Work into a Pressure Damage and then kept adding more layers of Pressure Damage to the mix.

Pein watched a crispy bird come plummeting from the sky, just missing his nose as the inferno grew further out of control, turning into a column of fiery tornado the width of... well, a bunch of space. One hand casually rose. "Heavenly Gaze of the Omnipresent God." There was a distinct lack of sound as the entire thing didn't so much go out as simply vanish in an instant. "I think you have caused the citizens enough distress for the day. I want to talk to you."

"Alright." Hari began conjuring Shadow Clones and fighting them.

"I have come to a decision regarding your autonomy as a pseudo-operative of the Akatsuki."

"I'm going to get to go on missions?"

"No. You're no longer allowed outside of the Tower without an escort."

"Aww."

"And 'escort' means a member of the organization's inner circle—an S-ranked ninja, Hari. And your Clones do *not* count." Pein observed

that his nephew was having the sensation of receiving the memory of being punched a moment before receiving it and with it was getting the sensation of being about to be punched while also experiencing the moment of about to punch.

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==Five Minutes Ago==

"Pein?"

Pein looked up from his map of the world. He'd pushed a few things around and was consulting a sheaf of notes and making adjustments to his collection of figurines. The slug figure had been removed—although the Fire Hat now had a little sake bottle hanging off of a tassel.

"Yes, Sasori?" Pein sounded frustrated, no doubt because he'd been spending the better part of an hour trying to work out why Waterfall had suddenly begun recalling military assets and had gone into a complete lockdown.

"I see you're holding this morning's intelligence report."

"Thank you for that insight."

"I think I might be able to explain the sudden change."

Pein cocked his head. "I'm going to regret this. Why?"

"Well, the reports are unconfirmed, but..."

"What happened?"

"It appears that someone stole all of the Hero Water."

"Someone what?"

"This is all hearsay, mind you. And I don't have any potential leads, but it's a matter of some concern that a major enhancement like that is now in play and..."

"And Hari."

"I'm sorry?"

"He said he needed to take a trip yesterday."

"I'm not sure how that-"

"Something about getting together some stuff for school. And he mentioned that he was headed..."

"To Waterfall?"

"He mentioned something about seeing the sights."

"Like the Hero Water?"

"It would appear so. This is Hari, though-he seems to have a knack for acquiring things he's not supposed to have."

"An admirable trait in a ninja."

"Not on this scale." Pein rubbed his face. "So the only good news is that we don't have to worry about Waterfall trying to declare war on us. No accurate descriptions or anything."

"About that..."

"What else?"

"While no one was able to accurately describe the person involved, he or she was wearing a black cloak with red clouds on it."

"Of course."

"On the upside, without their Hero Water, Waterfall can't afford an engagement against us, even if we *do* employ their most wanted criminal."

"That's something."

"Up until now, that would have been Kakuzu."

"Thank you."

"Just trying to help, Pein."

"So that's a major village and two minor ones Hari has managed to annoy in the space of about two weeks?"

Sasori looked down at his wooden fingers and mumbled for a moment. "Maybe more if someone was planning to hire Waterfall for something."

"Right. That's it." Pein stormed out of the room, leaving Sasori to stare at the map in wonder at the amount of damage a boy not even thirteen could do. Even *Itachi* had waited until he was thirteen and had only slaughtered a major clan, not potentially started multiple wars simultaneously.

"It just goes to prove what I've been saying about the right force in the right place," he murmured.

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Tsunade sat in the Hokage manor, staring at a report from Jiraiya. What she was reading couldn't possibly be true. Apparently the old leetch had actually cut short his whoring because of some incident he had to investigate. The sake wasn't helping, either, because things should be making more sense than that.

Of course there was the later report from Jiraiya that explained what the incident was. Apparently "someone" had made off with all of Waterfall's Hero Water. It wasn't clear if the village had a way of getting more without an extant sample, so it was possible that a minor village had been permanently crippled by the loss. She was having a debate with herself about whether or not she should tell Jiraiya that she knew who the perpetrator was. It *could* be that a random member of the Akatsuki decided to make off with a valuable and highly guarded substance without causing major casualties in the process, but somehow it seemed like exactly the kind of thing that her recent visitor would do (to judge from the stuff he'd done. Perhaps he'd thought he was being helpful?) and it was only a question of whether her amusement at Jiraiya's confusion (how did the man not remember someone who'd featured so heavily in a report he wrote less than a year ago?) outweighed the importance to the village of having its spymaster fully up to date that was keeping her from enjoying a moment of relaxed smirking before returning to her mystification that Jiraiya had managed to leave a brothel early even for something as major as the theft of the Hero Water.

"Tsunade?" came a hesitant voice.

"Shizune," Tsunade sighed. "What went wrong?"

"What makes you think something went wrong?"

"When I'm wearing this hat, you only call me by my name when you're trying to keep me calm while giving me bad news."

"Oh. Um... well... the thing is..."

"We're not being invaded; I'm not drunk enough to miss that."

"Are you ever drunk enough?"

"Sadly, no. Nothing has exploded beyond normal training. My apprentice hasn't killed a patient. Lee's weights haven't been stolen again. Ibiki finally managed to get the doors squeaking again-and

gods did Mitarashi complain about rust-creation duty-speaking of which: Mitarashi didn't manage to kill anyone on her way to dumplings-with-sauce. Kakashi hasn't lost more porn. The memorial stone still stands. Gai hasn't decided to forego the Way of Youth. The Academy is still full of students instead of future homicidal maniacs with PTSD-oh wait... no, still normal. My sake hasn't run out. You haven't found a boyfriend. Yuuhi and Sarutobi are still under the impression that they are subtle. My sake hasn't run out. The ANBU are still where they belong. And Jiraiya is probably still a pervert. What am I missing?"

"Uchiha Sasuke left the village."

"Fuck."

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Uchiha Sasuke jogged down the road wearing the guise of a young man headed on an errand for his elderly granny. The ability to be someone other than himself had been a point that Kabuto had stressed, so Sasuke even had a small basket of treats for an old woman. He would use it to beat someone and steal his clothes a few miles away and then be someone on the way to go fishing. Or maybe a traveling merchant-it depended what he found on the corpse.

It was amusing how easy it was to evade ANBU after attempting to murder Orochimaru. Compared to the Snake Sage, ANBU might as well be civilians-which made sense, given the number of people who would like to have Orochimaru's head over their gates (starting with Sasuke and the ANBU he'd just evaded).

He hoped that Kabuto would keep him apprised of how things went in Leaf. Given what the Hokage had been complaining about, his adopted cousin was incredibly inventive in ways to make use of the Uchiha name. It had been odd to see so many people wearing shirts

with his family crest on it and even odder to see the jewelry with the Uchiha fan (and don't get him started on the subject of the Uchiha™ kunai). Most worrying had been the body-pillows-Sasuke felt certain that his best friend was being corrupted by the ancient pervert who was training him, but Naruto was filling the Uchiha coffers with more money than ever. And then his crazy best friend was using that money to make more money and generally increase the family's actual political power.

His short exposure to the tower pile of forms he'd needed to fill out and the similarly daunting list of meetings he needed to hold and letters to be written had been enough to make him certain that he was better off leaving everything in Naruto's hands. In fact, it had been one of the chief reasons he'd decided to leave so soon. Until Naruto returned to Leaf, Sasuke had no intention of being the Head of the clan-not while it meant he had to handle all that.

So it was, that he had a light heart at abandoning his home a second time, the teetering stacks of paperwork in his memory giving him a warm feeling with the knowledge that it wasn't his problem.

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"I want a report from the commander of the ANBU about how a thirteen-year-old managed to evade them so thoroughly," Tsunade said as she pushed open the door to her office. "And then someone send Naruto a letter saying that... he's..." the state of her desk slowly dawned on her. "Shizune?"

"Yes?"

"Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?"

"That your sake pile has stacks of gleaming paperwork on it?"

"Yes."

"Indeed you are."

Tsunade shielded her eyes as she approached. "How did he manage to polish paperwork?"

"I'm guessing with chakra, Tsunade."

Tsunade threw a cancelation on the pile and sighed as the glow toned down to merely dim. "This... this is all the paperwork for the Uchiha. He's even done a month in advance."

"That was most conscientious of Uchiha Sasuke, to do that before he left."

"It's signed by Naruto."

"Oh."

"How did he manage that?" Shizune opened her mouth. "If you say 'with a brush' I will be most annoyed." Shizune's mouth closed. "I mean, we haven't even announced it yet, let alone had enough time for the news to travel to... I think they're headed to Waterfall, so around there."

The Hokage stormed over to the window and glared out at the village. For a time, she stared in silence at the people going about their business outside, apparently deep in thought. The ANBU commander stood at attention, wondering if he was going to have to explain a failure, or just die of old age (a nasty part of his mind pointed out that his leader was likely to do that first) and Shizune began to scuttle about, moving the paperwork to the appropriate people and muttering about how she could get a boyfriend if she wanted.

"Um... I think I can explain how he got away," began the ANBU commander.

"He has *spies*!" hissed Tsunade. "In my village!"

"I don't think that's why, my lady."

"Not just spies! That isn't enough." Tsunade slammed a fist down on the windowsill, smashing it into splinters. "He has clones spying on me!"

"I don't think Uchiha Sasuke knows any clone techniques usable for spying, my lady."

"I gave him my necklace! How could he be so suspicious?"

The ANBU commander shifted uneasily. The last time he'd seen the missing boy, he'd not been wearing a necklace and a perusal of his effects had not turned up any jewelry either (the sixteen poison rings and various concealed weapons disguised as small items including the six miniature daggers on chains and decorated with the Uchiha crest didn't count-the boy was a ninja, after all).

"I want every ANBU member looking for him!"

"Understood, my lady." The ANBU commander paused-this would normally be unthinkable, but he was already confused at the moment and wanted to make sure. "I'll have them track down Uchiha Sasuke."

"What?" snapped Tsunade. "Fuck that! Find Uchiha Naruto!"

"I'll send a team to Waterfall to intercept-

"Not the real one!"

"I'm sorry, my lady?"

"His clones!"

"Understood, my lady. It shall be as you will." The ANBU commander left the room in a panic. It was hard enough to find a single Naruto who wasn't learning the spy trade from Leaf's spymaster-now he had to try and find at least one of many. In any other case, that would

increase his odds that a team would turn something up, but Naruto had been dodging ANBU so long that the commander was fairly certain that having more of them would at best make them unable to find any of them and at worst would result in the various clones aiding one another in evading his patrols. He was doomed.

X

X

==OUT TAKE==

"Class," said Hari, "today we have a guest instructor." He pointed to a hunchbacked figure with a mask over its face and a freakish haircut that looked like someone had carved wood and glued it to his head.

"Greetings, class," the man's voice was like a cultured death rattle. "I am Sasori of the Red Sand. I will be teaching you today about the ways your foe might try to attack you indirectly."

A hand rose at the back of the room. "Yes, Mister Ashcroft?"

"How did you know my name?"

"I know more than that, Mister Ashcroft. Do you want me to demonstrate?"

"I just wanted to know why you don't have a family name."

"Because people remember me for living in the desert. And for leaving a trail of bodies in my wake as well as the leveling of a small country in a single day. There was a lot of blood."

"Oh."

"We begin with how to deal with the blackmailing of a friend or lover..."

X

X

"So I would like to thank our guest instructor," Dumbledore said from the head of the Great Hall. He looked at the misshapen form that appeared to be looking at the hall with its unblinking stare. "I am sure that his lessons in how to handle counter-intelligence issues are welcome. I know that we will all sleep less soundly in our beds knowing that anyone we trust can be easily suborned by someone with the right skills. Perhaps this will encourage you to sleep in your own beds for a change.

"I am similarly glad that we are all aware of the dangers of poison in everyday foodstuffs and those toxins that can be used by less common methods. The fact that a dangerous topical-paralytic looks just like common starch used for laundry is a bowel-looseningly terrifying one. I give three hundred points to Mister Potter for going to Diagon Alley to collect the bezoars needed to help with recovery from these lessons. I am sure that the House Elves will be absolutely terrified when they go about their tasks that they are about to harm one of their charges.

"Please don't ever come back."

(A/N John)

And so we finish another lesson from the Akatsuki. I have several more planned out. Yes, eventually they will all get their non-canonical chance to instruct the youth of Hogwarts.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, this chapter has so much that is set up for future chapters (read: Chapter 38) that I'm amazed it all panned out.

(A/N 3 John)

For those of you wondering: Tsunade is convinced that the only way Naruto could have done all the paperwork is by spying on the village so he knew he was head of the Uchiha again.

(A/N 4 John)

She might be right.

(A/N 5 John)

Poor Lockhart. It's not that he's a nice person, but he's going to be blamed for yet more things soon.

(A/N 6 John)

Though possibly not for a while.

(A/N 7 John)

Hope ya'll aren't too attached to some people, though. I decided that we've not had enough deaths recently.

Negotiations

Chapter 38: Negotiations

... I Guess That Concludes Them

"Do you have everything packed?" asked Itachi.

Hari looked down at the insides of his forearms. "Yeah, dad."

"I realize that this is silly, but did you pack the Hero Water?"

"Of course."

"Good. It's just that Leader-sama doesn't want it around here. He said something about having enough enemies without that in our backyard."

"What's that mean?"

Itachi sighed. "Is there anything you still need before you go?"

"Well, I have a gift for Uncle Tobi."

"I'm not sure that's-" but Hari was already gone.

X

X

"Uncle Pein! Uncle Tobi!" Hari ran in the window and over the mound of paperwork that Pein had begun to use as a desk in deference to the fact that his actual desk was still being used as a nest.

"Yes?" the orange-haired man looked up, head cocked to the side.

"I'm headed out to school."

"Thank the gods," muttered Pein.

"But I wanted to give Uncle Tobi a gift before I did!"

Tobi took the package warily. It was shaped properly to be his mask. He tore the wrapping open and froze. In his hands was his mask. If it had been whittled from a rotted log by a two-year-old. It bore a superficial resemblance to his mask, but the paint was haphazardly applied and the underlying wood was pitted with age and damage. And the chisel had slipped regularly.

"See? I replaced the mask I st-borrowed." Hari waved and then vanished in a cloud of fire as his Uncle Tobi began to vibrate with happiness.

X

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==Roughly The Same Time==

Hidan was standing guard outside the perimeter of the Tower. As was usual when guarding something that no one is stupid enough to attack (and that most people would never think worth attacking in the first place), he was doing so by sitting in a lawn chair. There wasn't any sun, but he was making the best of it with a large umbrella and a warm blanket. He was, however, remaining alert; sometimes he let out a snore to make sure people knew he was paying attention.

Someone gently prodded his foot and then jumped back to avoid the instinctive swing of a giant scythe that was his response. "What do you lot... want?" He'd trailed off as he realized that the four standing in front of him were some of the weirdest he'd ever seen. One of them was fat and balding, one had a twin in a baby carrier on his back, one had six arms, and he'd fuck the redhead.

"We would like to speak to your leader," said the one with blue hair and a third head. "Orochimaru would like to request the return of his

research."

Hidan blinked. "Um... what?"

"Listen, you walking cocksleeve," snapped the redhead. "Orochimaru sent us to get his stuff back from your freak child."

Hidan blinked again. "Says the thing made for dick. I can give you a better use for that mouth, you arrogant little cunt. I'll make it twice as dirty."

The fat one covered his face with his hands. "Why did you take the tape off her?"

"Oh, you're a kinky little bitch, aincha?"

"I'm going to kill you, Jiroubu. Then I'm going to kill this limp-dicked old man."

"I'll show you 'old man' slut! You'll be screaming for this 'old man' cock. Or maybe just screaming." Hidan groped himself lewdly and gave a pelvic thrust. "But I bet you like it that way, right?"

"Not like you'd get it up to try, you walking example of a used-condom!"

The one with six arms grabbed the redhead's limbs and slapped a hand over her mouth. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"If you need to restrain her, I've got plenty of chains. In the meantime, keep her quiet. She shouldn't make noise and that mouth should be closed unless it's being put to its proper use."

The freak screamed as her foot met his crotch and he clutched at himself with all his hands. "Trying to help some loser rape me because you're too weak to even try on your own?" she snarled at him as he whimpered. She started to stomp on his hands.

"A ballbuster, too?"

"I'll give you ballbusting!" The redhead began to grow dusky as she drew a flute from her sleeve.

"Tayuya!" snapped the three-headed one. The girl subsided into sotto voce curses and deprecations regarding the potency and virility of everyone around her.

"I'd be happy to show you differently, you mouthy panty-hamster," Hidan drawled, groping himself and doing some more thrusts.

"Please don't encourage her," said the quiet one as the fat, balding one grabbed Tayuya and shushed her. "Maybe we can discuss business?"

"I've got business with her... ow!" Hidan clutched at his head where Deidara had smacked him.

"What do you want, yeah?" asked the mad bomber.

"We've come to request Lord Orochimaru's research back."

Deidara looked passed the four to see a small army of ninja looking slightly nervous. "Yeah?"

"Well, I say 'request'..." the apparent leader shrugged.

"What research, yeah?"

"He didn't say. I gather it was taken by someone very short who kidnapped one of our ninja while he was visiting. Lord Orochimaru is most upset."

"Hmm... was the kidnapped ninja Uchiha Sasuke, yeah?"

"I'm not at liberty to answer that question," came the prim answer as the man gave a slight nod.

"I'll see if I can at least find out, yeah."

X

X

"Pein, yeah?" Deidara poked his head into the room. "Hey, Tobi, yeah," he greeted the shaking figure. "So there are a bunch of Sound ninja downstairs. They're 'requesting' the return of some research material Hari took, yeah."

"When you say 'requesting'..." Pein murmured.

"There's a small army, yeah. I think they're planning to insist, yeah."

"I see. Well then-" Pein cut himself off as Tobi stormed over to the window and leaned forwards slightly, lifting the bottom of his mask. The tower began to shake suddenly as flashes of light threw the cheerful idiot's shadow on the far wall, outlined in flickering orange and red. Throughout it all, there was a long scream of anger. It was just possible to tell, between the explosions, that the scream was "HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!"

After a time, the mask was replaced and Tobi left the room, stomping and muttering unkind words about his nephew. Deidara walked over to the window and glanced outside. "They appear to have left, Pein."

The man in question covered his face in his hands. "Thank you, Deidara."

"Any time, yeah."

X

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"Lord Orochimaru."

"Ah, Kimimaro," the snake sage purred as he turned from an experiment that entailed doing something unpleasant (for someone

else) to a person's liver while it was still in active use. "How did it go?"

"Um... about that, my Lord..."

"Did your team get my research back?"

Kimimaro watched as from out of the Tower, balls of fire the size of trees began to rain down.

"... I would say that the negotiations broke down."

"How did that happen?"

Then the explosions started. And then more fire enveloped the area in a hellish conflagration .

"Actually... I would say that the *negotiators* broke down."

"Come again?"

"Someone decided to hit them with fireballs."

"Are they dead?"

"I think so, Lord Orochimaru."

"You 'think' they're dead?"

The reflective surface of the ground shattered into fine powder under the barrage before turning liquid again and forming a gleaming crust.

"There weren't any bodies, but I don't know if they could survive being turned to glass, then pulverized to dust and then reglassed."

"Uh..."

"But I'm aware that these are people associated with you, Lord Orochimaru, so I can't be sure."

"I see. While I thank you for your faith in me Kimimaro, I think that I can safely say that the team is deceased. Shame."

"I was most sorry to lose Sakon and Ukon," said Kimimaro.

"And Tayuya and Jirobu and Kidomaru," added Orochimaru. "He was an especially successful work."

"... yes, them too, Lord Orochimaru."

"Might I ask, Kimimaro, why it is that you got there in a week and it took you two to return?"

"Well, given how displeased someone was, I thought it best if I took a slightly more circuitous route to avoid bringing anyone with me."

"Lord Orochimaru," said Kabuto, entering the room. "Oh, hello Kimimaro. Finally turned up?"

"Yes, Yakushi."

"Nice of you to get here. Speaking of turning up, want to know who was knocking on the front gate just now?"

"If you tell me that it's someone wearing red and black, I'm going to be really upset."

"No," Uchiha Sasuke walked into the room looking bored. "I would have been pretty annoyed if my nephew'd shown up again."

"Ah, Sasuke." Orochimaru's voice made the other three cringe a little, wondering if he was about to molest Sasuke right there. "So nice of you to come back."

"You didn't finish training me."

"True. Welcome all the same. We were just discussing the deaths of the Sound Four."

"That's a few less reasons to question my choice to return, at least."

"Back to the subject at hand: do you have any clues why someone decided to escalate from military presence to utter annihilation of all parties?"

"No... not really. Well..." Kimimaro stroked his chin for a moment.
"There was a scream that sounded like 'ha-ah-rr-ri' so maybe it was 'hari' but really stretched out?"

"What the hell does my nephew have to do with those four wastes of flesh turning to corpses?"

"Glass, Uchiha," interjected Kimimaro.

"What?"

"They turned to glass and powder and glass. Not corpses."

"Will I have to hear the crazy redhead suggest that I lack the potency to impregnate an already-knocked-up-bitch-her words-again?"

"No."

"Will the fat one complain again?"

"No."

"Will the idiot with the arms try to be funny?"

"No."

"Will the freak with the freakish tumor try and order me around?"

"No."

"Then I don't really care about the details."

"Your empathy is touching, Sasuke," said Kabuto with a faint smile that made Sasuke think the boy might be serious.

"Wait, what was that about your nephew?" said Orochimaru, suddenly looking up.

"What?"

"You asked what your nephew had to do with the deaths of the Sound Four."

"Oh. Yeah. I don't know a lot of reasons for someone to shout the syllables 'hari', but I can think of one and it's a pretty good reason."

"You have a nephew?"

"Yes. And a cousin."

"Your brother seems to have been a bit lax in his execution of your family."

"Oh, and a sister."

"Good grief. Definitely not as advertised."

"To be fair, deciding not to murder his own son and his sister who mothered him-the son, I mean-isn't totally unreasonable."

"Come again?"

"My family bred my older brother with our older sister."

"That's sick!" Orochimaru's pale skin had turned slightly green.

"Did I mention he was eleven at the time?"

"Your family were freaks whose deaths leave the world a better place."

"I know, right? And the worst part was that they pretended she was dead. I think they kept her locked up in the basement for my brother. It's probably why he went insane."

"Were they trying to isolate some aspect of the Sharingan?" Orochimaru's head cocked as he considered the matter. "I mean, that would make sense from a purely pragmatic standpoint. It's what we do with dogs."

"Thanks for that."

"What was your sister's name?"

"Kiko," replied Sasuke. "But she goes by Konan now for some reason. Are you okay?" The last part was because Orochimaru had been caught between maniacal laughter and choking.

"Good gods!" Orochimaru's voice was several octaves higher than usual. He cleared his throat. "Itachi was forced to breed with his bastard half-sister?"

"Bastard?"

"This sister lives in Rain?"

"Yeah."

Orochimaru activated an illusion and pointed to the image's hair. "Do you know any Uchiha with blue hair?"

"Oh fuck my life."

"What?" Kimimaro seemed vaguely concerned about a fellow Sound ninja.

"So one of my parents cheated. And they forced the result of that affair to become a breeding factory for their kid."

"So they must have been trying to fix some recessive trait the emerged thanks to their affair," Orochimaru murmured. He whirled to face Kabuto. "Why did you never bring me the Uchiha breeding logs?"

"As far as I know, because they don't exist, Lord Orochimaru."

"My brother might have burned them. He burned plenty of stuff one his way out, I'm told."

"Damnation! Foiled again by the Uchiha prodigy!" Orochimaru kicked his test subject, who gurgled gratefully as the blow killed him. "Damn again. Now I have to start over."

Sasuke was starting to wonder about the wisdom of his choice. A hand clapped down on his shoulder. "Sasuke," said Kabuto. "We need to make sure you didn't get soft during your time away."

X

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==OUT TAKE==

The fourth year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs walked into the Defense classroom and warily eyed the blond man-maybe, they weren't so sure about that-with hair covering one side of his (again, that question) face and a cloak like Hari's robes. The Muggleborn in the class were warier, as many of them recognized the object being idly tossed from hand to hand as a grenade. Their Pureblooded comrades were surprised that they shoved their way to the back, setting aside House rivalries in their desperation to be far from the future epicenter.

"Good afternoon, class," said Hari. "Today, we have a guest instructor again. This is my Uncle Deidara."

"Hey there, yeah. My name is Deidara and I'm the Mad Bomber of Stone!" He delivered the title with the same pride that someone else might say that he or she were the king of England. "Today we will be studying various kinds of shields..." here the blond looked down at a note in one hand. "Magical and normal and their various applications in preventing, avoiding, and channeling significant concentrations of force. In other words, we are playing with explosives today, yeah!"

"So," said Hari, "who can name a shield usable against a standard explosive hex?"

One of the Hufflepuffs raised a hand. "An enemy?"

Hari smiled. "Exactly! One of our focuses today will be on Summoning Charms."

Deidara tapped Hari on the shoulder and pointed out the window. "And as our guest instructor reminds me, we are adjourning to the out of doors in order to still have a castle at the end of lessons today."

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"And I would like to thank our guest instructor for graciously donating his time to help our students learn the best way to avoid being turned into a bloody paste. It is most unfortunate that three students didn't learn in time," said Dumbledore after dinner. "I am happy to say that we were planning to expand the Lake, so the impromptu demolitions performed as part of today's... unplanned activities... work out for the best, although we are having to see if we can find a new colony of Merpeople to move in. Again.

"On a related note, I am happy to report that the Forbidden Forest is much less forbidden... in that there is less of it to forbid. On the other hand, I am able to announce the new rules regarding the Forbidden Crater which students are expressly *forbidden* from entering until

such time as it has been verified clear of all remaining explosives and landmines.

"I hope you all enjoyed your fish for dinner and will do so again for the foreseeable future." He turned to Deidara. "Please don't come back."

(A/N John)

This chapter is delayed because Spoon kept giving me ideas for short pieces that needed to be written down. Blame her.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, I really liked writing this chapter. It was just so much crazy and yet not. I realize that doesn't make much sense, but there you are.

(A/N 3 John)

I wish to credit Bennet the Sage for giving me the phrase "panty-hamster". I'm not sure it was original, but that's where I got it.

(A/N 4 John)

So Tobi is slowly going... something. I'm not sure what. But it's fun to write.

(A/N 5 John)

The exchange between Tayuya and Hidan was troublesome because once it started, it was so hard to stop. The two really are made for each other (in the sense of being made to be written opposite, not romantically. They'd hate each other.)

Angled Chaos

Chapter 39: Angled Chaos

Severus Snape unzipped the fly of his semi-muggle pants and began his summer ritual of relieving himself on the grave of his father. It wasn't nearly enough to repay the bastard for years of misery, but it was a final humiliation that Snape intended to enjoy until he died if it required catheter bags to achieve. The man wasn't actually buried there, because Snape had spent a good bit of time looking up rituals in the forbidden section of the library and had made use of the absolute darkest one he could find that involved defiling the grave of one's father. To maximize the effect, he'd reburied the man and defiled the new grave several times. He only stopped when he ran out of goats.

"What're you doing, Professor Snape?"

Urine flew wildly as Snape jumped. "DAMNIT POTTER!"

"Hey, Professor."

Snape closed his eyes and focused on finishing what he was doing before turning around to glare at the brat. "Was that absolutely necessary?"

"Whose grave is that?" Hari noted the name 'Tobias Snape' on it.
"Someone in the way of your inheritance?"

Snape stared for a moment. "In a manner of speaking."

"Brother?"

"No."

"Sister?"

"With a name like 'Tobias'?"

"You people have weird names."

"No."

"Oh. How'd he die?"

"Officially? Suicide. They didn't want to list 'severe rupturing' on the death certificate."

Hari nodded sagely. "So I need you to analyze something."

"And if I say no?"

"Here," Hari replied, shoving a cup of water into the man's hands.

Snape considered for a moment before deciding that saying no wasn't going to work and, in fact, that the effort to get Potter to fuck off during his sacred Time Away From Students would be greater than just dealing with this. Knowing that he'd damned himself, he drew his wand and poked it at the water. "It's water."

"No it's not."

Snape closed his eyes for a moment. "Potter, it's water."

"I'll be right back."

Snape watched his student (for a very loose definition of the term) vanish in a ball of fire. Shouldn't there have been a phoenix there? Maybe there was and his brain was just refusing to accept it.

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Twenty minutes later, he brought a lawn chair outside with a drink made from firewhisky. Sort of. As the Potions Master of one of

Europe's most prestigious schools, he had access to more than enough lab equipment and had, over the years, worked on redistilling firewhisky into something far more potent. The rest of his drink was a carefully balanced cocktail of poisonous potions that counteracted each other in a surprisingly fruity aftertaste. Of course, if someone hadn't spent so much time building tolerances to toxins of all sorts (and even more time cutting open his abdomen and fusing a bezoar to his liver) it would probably be instantly lethal and then do horrible things to the corpse.

X

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Hari landed in Diagon and began to stroll down the street, taking things in. There were an awful lot of those auror-people hanging around. The occasional Hogwarts student recognized Hari and turned to go in the opposite direction, but no one else realized that the Boy-Who-Lived was also apparently in possession of only one eye, that the eye in question was red and spinning, and walked around with several openly carried weapons.

Hari looked at a *Daily Profit* someone was reading. Oh. That explained a lot. And made things more confusing.

London-Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, spoke once again about the need for public calm in the wake of the escape of a maximum security prisoner from Azkaban three weeks ago. While our community is still reeling from the escape and the deaths of six aurors in the process (for those readers who weren't aware, the last time more than two aurors died in a single incident was not since He Who Must Not Be Named was active), the Minister reaffirmed the need to stand strong and work together to bring the monster to justice. The public is asked to remain alert and report any sightings of the Ministry's Public Enemy Number One. If anyone sees him, please contact the aurors as quickly as possible. 'Do not engage him in conversation, let alone anything more,' says Director of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones. 'Again: do not approach this man. I

cannot stress enough just how dangerous Gilderoy Lockhart is. We think that he might be wearing the disguise of Stubby Boardman (picture to the left) so be alert and stay safe.'

Hari was trying to process that as he skimmed the rest of the paper being read across the street. An unrelated article nevertheless caught his attention.

Amelia Bones praised Hogwarts yesterday when she noted that the newest recruits for the Auror Academy seemed to be remarkably well prepared. She specifically praised the Defense Against the Dark Arts program at her alma mater, saying 'I was truly impressed with how ready to defend people these new recruits are. They show the willingness to deal with dangerous situations that normally takes years to develop. Whatever it is Albus Dumbledore is doing, he should keep it up.' It would appear that despite Albus Percival Wulfric Brian James Franklin Aesopp Cicero Dumbledore being the most unhinged man to wield political power in our fair country, he is somehow making strides in education. We only hope that he managed it without scarring our youth for life.

So Gilderoy Lockhart was wanted... Hari made his way to Knockturn and decided to kill two villages with one technique...

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"Hi, Professor!"

Snape gagged on his drink and fire blasted from his nostrils as he coughed. "Potter!" He looked up from his potions magazine to see Hari holding a somewhat terrified looking old woman. "What are you doing with Miss Cripslock?"

"Well, I needed to demonstrate that the 'water' isn't just that."

"And you couldn't do it on yourself or me because it would be lethal?"

"How'd you know?"

"It came to me. Now put her back."

"But..."

"No, Potter, put her back. I buy things from her. I won't be able to do that if you kill her, so put her back."

Hari vanished in a cloud of fire, leaving the shaking woman on Snape's lawn. He sighed and petrified her before going back to his magazine. He'd been planning to read it today and maybe he could get most of that done before...

Hari appeared again with a trunk. "I've got her shop packed up for you. Even the stuff she had under the weird spells in the back. Not sure what they were for, though."

"That's all well and good, but I don't want to have to find a new supplier. Put. Her. Back."

"But..."

"Now! Find someone I won't miss to use as your crup."

Hari grumbled something that Snape decided to pretend he didn't hear and vanished with the woman. Snape was about to go back to his magazine when he realized that the trunk was still on his lawn. He shrugged and levitated it over to him and began to go through it. Then he slammed it shut and looked around in sudden paranoia. If people ever knew he'd even had something *resembling* custody of some of these things, he'd be lucky to go to Azkaban.

On the other hand, the odds of him ever getting to use these ingredients... he looked around again and then sent a patronus to Dumbledore. Moments later, Fawkes landed on the trunk and

vanished. The Hogwarts Potions Master's lab was pretty hard to find already. He'd be upgrading that.

"Hi, Professor!"

Snape looked up from his contemplation of ways to secure the stash until he could see if there might be some beneficial use to some of the Class I potions ingredients. And maybe some uses that Class II ingredients could be used for that might justify their acquisition. Then he sighed. "Borgin. How nice to see you."

"I have rights!" snapped the man. "I know you, Snape! You're traitorous scum. You—" he gurgled when Hari chopped him across the throat.

" You talk too much." Hari held up a glass. "This is water." He poured it down the man's throat, ignoring the choking as some of it went the wrong way. " *This is Hero Water.*" This time, the liquid was swallowed and then followed by the manifestation of a visible magical aura.

"That..." Snape cast a few spells. "There is no way that old bastard had that much power."

"Hero Water," replied Hari.

Snape ignored the boy and instead began casting diagnostic spells on Borgin. "Oh, that's not going to end well for him," he murmured. "I don't know how it's doing it, but I think it's burning life energy for power."

"Could be."

"I'm going to take a guess," Snape went on as he conjured some parchment and pulled a ballpoint pen from a pocket. "You want to know how to make more and how to make it not kill you to use it, right?"

Hari blinked. "Yes."

"Sounds like I have a project for this year, then." Snape paused. "By the way, Professor Sprout says that whatever the hell it was you planted in her greenhouse has been wandering around at night and would you please have a word with it?"

"I guess."

"She's overjoyed, mind you, but it keeps picking fights with the Whomping Willow. She and Poppy are also wondering if you can find a way to get it to stop complaining when they cut samples off."

"I'll see what I can do." Hari vanished in a ball of fire.

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Hari sat with a handful of normal medical gear and a few vials of potions. It had taken some time and several kidnapped people before he'd worked out what the right dosage had been. Out of deference to Professor Snape, he'd made sure that they didn't have potions shops.

Then he'd had to work out how to make sure he got full coverage, but he finally was pretty sure that he would manage now.

X

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Hari strolled out of Fortescue's shop. It had been his last stop and he'd gotten more than enough to do the trick. Now he just had to sit back and watch.

As Hari strolled towards the Leaky Cauldron, he heard the sound of someone gasping and then, moment later, the cry of 'there he is!'

and the sound of spellfire. Then the screams started and began to spread rapidly.

X

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The next day, Hari stole a *Daily Prophet* and read the article as he sat on the only remaining chair in the Leaky Cauldron. The smell of smoke reminded him of home as he absently ate some pocky he'd taken from his hosts while they had been asleep.

London-Yesterday a scene of absolute chaos engulfed Diagon Alley in what is already being referred to as the Lockhart Siege. Dozens of witches and wizards, many of them minors, found themselves forcibly transformed into facsimiles of Gileroy Lockhart while going about their normal shopping. Aurors, who were on guard for the presence of Public Enemy Number One proceeded to do their duty and attempted to bring in the most wanted man in all of England.

The resulting violence only spread as person after person transformed, sometimes en masse and aurors valiantly tried to capture all of their quarries at once. Unfortunately, several of the later victims of this transfiguration took poorly to what some have called the 'high handed and brutal tactics' employed by the aurors as things grew more and more out of hand and attempted to fight back. As a result, aurors began to use the spells they normally reserve for violent altercations and the new recruits stationed with their training wizards escalated to banishing transfigured steel projectiles and massed clouds of flechette or grapeshot that they insisted they learned at Hogwarts.

Despite the overenthusiasm of the trainees, Saint Mungos' reports that all are expected to survive, including several bystanders who were pinned between a Lockhart lookalike and a wall by a steel spike and those who suffered injuries or loss of limbs to the trainee's crowd control methods used to disburse groups of Lockharts with unfortunate results.

Several trainees were heard bemoaning that their Professor would be so disappointed in them. It should come as no surprise that Gilderoy Lockhart would be sad to hear that his ploy to kill nearly a hundred innocents in Diagon Alley failed and that despite his attempts to train young witches and wizards to be his butchers by proxy, that he would be most upset that they didn't kill anyone.

The Ministry insists that 'Lockhart One' (later identified as Lucius Malfoy) flung the first spell and so would not be paying damages for any of the resulting battle. Upon discovering who Lockhart One was, Minister Fudge attempted to backtrack and said that some reparations might be paid, but was cut off by the Ministry Treasurer who held firm to the promise made. Time will tell whether anyone will receive money for their losses in this horrible tragedy.

Any person with information that can assist the authorities in their pursuit of the monster Lockhart who perpetrated this travesty is encouraged to contact Amelia Bones, Director of Magical Law Enforcement, who has insisted that Lockhart will stand trial for his recent crimes before execution 'if I really must allow it'.

X

X

==OUT TAKE==

"Good afternoon, class," said Hari as he sat on the desk at the front of the room. Next to him was a white-haired man with impressive musculature on display. The man also was missing his arms, although 'missing' was probably too strong, given that a pair of arms with his skin tone were lying against the wall behind the desk. For some reason, Hari was holding the end of a length of chain that led to a collar around the man's neck. The man was scowling as best he could with a ball-gag in his mouth. The Seventh Years sighed and prepared for another practical lesson.

"Now that everyone is here, we will be going outside to the expanded lake. Today is target practice against living target."

"Don't you mean targets, Professor Hari?"

"No."

"Oh."

"Your target today is acting as a stand in for the various dangerous creatures you may face in your careers as wielders of weapons of casual destruction." As Hari spoke he dragged Hidan from the room. "When we get outside, you will form up and, one at a time, take turns facing off against our guest professor, Hidan. He will charge you and attempt to bite your throat out or kick your testicles/ovaries through your pelvis. I will give you this fair warning that if you do not use the tactics I have been instructing, you will be lucky if you just spend the evening in Hospital."

X

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"And so we once again thank a guest lecturer for visiting our lovely school in order to broaden our horizons. I thank Professor Potter for restoring the gag to the current guest so that we do not risk our hair catching fire under a stream of invectives.

"I am sure we all wish a quick recovery to those of the Seventh Year class who were too stupid to heed a direct warning from their Professor. Thankfully, Madam Pomphrey was on hand during class and was able to prevent any loss of life, though I understand that Miss Hayle will never get the use of her arm back and that Messrs Puce and Teer will not be able to continue their family lines-so at least something good has come out of this."

Dumbledore turned to the man who was still missing his arms and was wrapped in chains and bound to a chair by the expedient

method of transfiguring part of the chair into straps. "I say this with feeling: never come back."

(A/N John)

This chapter was a lot of fun to write and has been quite a while in the making. This is why I feel a bit bad for Lockhart. He's not nearly bad enough to get blamed for this.

(A/N 2 John)

The crazy thing is that thanks to Spoon, this entire little segue has taken on a life of its own. There are several bits of this that have become incorporated into the fic as more than just one-off jokes.

(A/N 3 John)

This does mean that sometimes things are going to be a bit stranger than you might expect.

(A/N 4 John)

If you're wondering: Hari used a few chemicals that help absorb things through the skin, Polyjuice potion, hair from Lockhart's comb, and knuts that he scattered into several popular Diagon institutions. Including an ice cream parlor frequented by children.

(A/N 5 John)

That wasn't actually an attempt to kill children. It just worked out that way.

It All Started With An Article

Chapter 40: It All Started With An Article

... Or the Magazine That Changed the World

Hari was going through the magazines at various newsstands and noticed one that he'd overlooked in the past. He absently stole it and began to read, casually sidestepping traffic as he ignored lights and signals and, on one occasion, a high-speed lorry. Without paying attention, he walked down an alley and lost the pursuit of several officers who wanted to discuss various accidents that had happened as a result of people swerving to avoid him. It didn't help that they didn't look up where Hari had simply walked up a wall, still reading. Technically, he'd read the thing instantly with his Byakugan, but he wanted to memorize it and then actually consider whether this was a prank.

When he finally decided it wasn't, he picked someone's pocket for a bit of money to buy postage and began to scrawl a long note.

X

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Itachi looked at the letter that had been dropped on his bed by his son's... at some point he would ask what it was. He knew Leader-Sama called it an ember-chicken and various other rude things, but he had kept forgetting to have a word with his son about the actual species. He missed his son, come to think of it, but he had to admit there was a great deal more peace without him... even with Hidan around and Madara apparently going sane.

He shrugged, opened the envelop, and read it. Then he read it a few more times and a small smile grew on his face. He tucked it into a pocket and went to go tell Leader-Sama the news.

X

X

"And so several of my spies have been... disappeared." Sasori reported. "It is most mysterious. Only two people knew those were my agents and I find it hard to believe that so many of my people might have sudden, lethal intentions coincidentally."

Itachi poked his head in. "Is now a bad time, Leader-Sama?"

Pein sighed. "Not really, Itachi." Seated at the table with him were Sasori (who was actually hunched beside the table) and Tobi, who was having one of his increasingly frequent moments of semi-sanity and was perched on the back of a chair, but had (as best as could be seen with only one eye visible) a dark look on his face.

"Someone is attacking our informants, then," hissed Tobi. Sasori seemed nonplussed by the inclusion of someone who was not technically an inducted member of the group, but was going along with it. "And if your reports are to be believed, also several of Rain's trade-partners on whom we depend for supplies."

"That sums it up pretty well, yes," said Sasori. "Though you forgot that a bounty that Kakuzu was looking to collect was collected early. That might not be related, but it was not a low-risk bounty and none of the usual players were around."

"There are some facts in your report..." murmured Tobi. "I wish to think on them for a time when we finish. I wonder..."

Sasori shrugged. "What do you want, Itachi?"

Itachi held out the note to Pein, who skimmed it and handed it to Sasori who passed it to Tobi who suddenly seemed to brighten up and almost fell off the back of his chair as he began to cackle with amusement.

Dear dad,

You'll never believe what I found! I don't know how I missed this in the past, but there is the most awesome magazine ever! It's a sort of public advertisement selection of people looking to be hired to fight in various conflicts-but this is sold in public! Not public like posted somewhere, but circulated all over the world.

I figure I have a bit of time before school starts, so I've decided to begin a franchise here and am actively seeking employment in a small war which I promise I will end in a satisfactorily violent and immediate fashion.

Best from your son,

Hari, Akatsuki Branch Office Proprietor

"Dear gods," murmured Pein. "I wonder how he got the idea that I approved of this." He ignored Tobi's cough in deference to the presence of Sasori. "But I suppose that at least he can't damage our reputation here. Worst comes to worst, he burns the world down around him and comes home... on second thought, that really *is* the worst possible outcome."

Tobi looked at Itachi. "You're not worried he'll get hurt?" Itachi raised an eyebrow. Tobi snickered. "We trained him. Right."

X

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Hari held up the magazine and read his ad with pride.

Call the Dawn!

No conflict too big, no assassination target too small. We don't ask questions like 'why', just when, where, who, and how. If you absolutely need it dead, we're the ones to call. All problems solved in one month or less (plus travel time) guaranteed or your money back.

Only accepting contracts until the middle of August so proprietor can return to school.

Dial 555-555-KILL, ask for Director Hari of the Dawn Branch Office. Also ask about employment opportunities!

It had appeared right above an ad that seemed familiar somehow.

Are you in trouble? Do you need help and everyone else has turned you down? Maybe you can hire us! Only accepting contracts in person, we always get the job done in the end and even leave your enemies alive to gloat over. We provide all equipment. No contracts from the American Military accepted.

Visit Lee's Lucky Laundry, Backalley Los Angeles, ask for Mr. Lee.

Hari had set up an office in the back room of the restaurant he was staying in again. So far, no one had called, but that was to be expected. In the meantime, the family was happy that their guest was doing something productive and promised to take any messages that came for him and mail them to the dead drop he'd arranged.

X

X

Hari strolled into Diagon Alley and smiled. There were several charred ruins of shops and almost every storefront was battered by projectiles. The aurors on guard were exceptionally jumpy and probably worried about what would happen if any more disasters struck and they responded as they had been trained. The people who were abroad in the alley had the nervous look of chickens being guarded by the foxes and aware that the wolf was outside and scratching at the gate. They watched the aurors warily, as though expecting that at any moment, one of the defenders of law would whip out his or her wand and begin flinging indiscriminant violence about the general vicinity.

Hari was tempted to stop inside Gringotts' to see if there was any damage inside, but the Goblins had a distinctly unfriendly look and he didn't plan to head inside there until he was ready to test their security. Judging from the scorches on the façade, though, the bank had not been immune to the recent events. In fact, the only shop not marked was the one with Olivander's sign up over it. No one seemed surprised by this.

Now seemed as good a time as any to get to work on something that he really should have been addressing for the past couple of years. Hari wandered the alley, looking for an auror with a fancier badge. Having selected one, he walked up to the man and waved. When the man waved back, Hari's Sharingan spun more wildly for a moment and then he turned and began to walk away.

That got a bit of work out of the way. He made his way into Knockturn and decided to go through Borgin's shop to see if anything interesting was in there before anyone realized that the man was absent.

Ten minutes later, he emerged, whistling absently. He wished he had some polyjuice left, but figured that things would get dull if he reused a trick too often. On the other hand, he had sealed a cabinet in his forearm to examine later. It was clearly a transporting-device, but he had no idea of how or where to. That would bear investigating. And the use of test subjects.

He left via the Leaky Cauldron, which was now mostly a shell and staffed by a pair of incredibly unhappy-looking aurors with grim expressions and the looks of people who weren't sure if they had drawn shit-duty or the lucky spot out of immediate line of fire.

His stop in Borgin's reminded him that he needed to do a bit of 'shopping' before he had to return to school. He decided to visit the British Museum again and amused himself for almost an hour by avoiding their improved security and then accessing the secret vault so that he could collect a few more items. He felt it would be best to be polite, so he left a single, white glove in place of the dark marble

with a couple specks of plaster dust on it and the small, blue gemstone that smelled faintly of goose.

That dealt with several of his needs, but he also stopped off at a pet shop and then swung by the SAS-Lifeguard Store. He had to avoid some rather obstinate guards and an increased number of defenses. That was life, he wanted to refill his supplies before he got called to work. It was depressing that the calls weren't in already, but that was to be expected.

X

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Hari leaned back in the chair he occupied, the only person in the abandoned ice cream parlor in Diagon. While people were slowly trickling back into the alley in general, no one had returned to Fortescue's shop. Apparently, people were upset about the number of children who had been maimed in and around it as a result of being dosed with polyjuice through their skin. It meant that Hari had a comfortable seat to himself and comparative peace and quiet as he watched people go by. He was sitting with an ever-filled notebook and a stack of folders and was busily copying bits of information even as his Sharingan memorized everything. One of the things about the Sharingan was that despite having perfect recall, being able to recall everything in one memory and having that memory be organized and including analysis made things easier.

It was fascinating stuff he had in front of him and was beginning to make some guesses about things that he didn't know for sure. He'd probably send his compiled books to Uncle Sasori to have him check them over, but he was already getting a pretty good picture of how things were working (and not working) beyond his firsthand observations.

On his other side was a thick book that had the dull appearance of an accounting ledger and he made frequent reference to it, even if that wasn't possible to notice from how he never actually looked at

the text in question. He had a small notebook in which he was compiling figures and mumbling to himself as he did.

Out of the corner of his eye (the Sharingan one. The other didn't see things in its corners) he saw a large dog sniffing around a gutter. That was odd. No one was paying it any mind, but most people probably thought that the collar around its neck meant that it was owned and that its owner was somewhere nearby. He watched for a time, setting his work aside and considering. He had some unique insights available to him at the moment as well, so perhaps others could be forgiven for missing the obvious. Maybe.

Regardless, he packed up his things. He figured there was a good chance he might want to make a few 'purchases' before it slipped his mind. It would be fun eventually. He trotted through Diagon made a turn down Knockturn and towards the darker part of Secshu. There was a good chance he'd find what he was looking for there. If not, he'd try Rekt or Nachur.

X

X

==OUT TAKE==

"Good afternoon, class," said Hari. He pointed at the giant man standing beside him. The man, in turn, glowered at the assembled First Years with eyes like cold emeralds in seas of ink. "Today, I brought in a guest to help begin your training in properly aggressive defensive tactics."

"My name is Kakuzu." The man's voice was almost metallic and had a grinding quality like meshing gears. "You will call me Teacher." The students nodded in terrified obedience. "Good. I don't like children. I don't like teaching. I like money. My nephew isn't paying me, so I am in a bad mood."

He cracked his neck, a process that took far too long and made too many sounds. "Everyone up. We're going to be having a practical lesson." The man tossed his cloak to the side and the students gasped as they saw a body crisscrossed with horrific scars and covered in obscene stitching. "Today you learn by sparring against me."

X

X

"I wish to... thank... our guest instructor, Mister Kakuzu," began Dumbledore as he looked out at the Great Hall. "I know that all of us are stronger for his teaching. Many of us will even get feeling back in our extremities in due time." He looked around. "Of course, it's a shame that so many of our young students are currently in Hospital instead of enjoying dinner with us, but since none of them have a working set of teeth at the moment, it is to be expected. It's for the best, really. They'd be sad watching us eat this lovely food and having their nutritious gruel.

"I note that only two students are having bones other than teeth regrown at the moment, which is, I feel, a sign of the improvements made by those of you who have regularly attended your Defense classes. I am pleased to announce that one student other than Professor Potter managed to go a whole six seconds with our guest before having his skull cracked in six places and every bone in his body snapped like a twig." Dumbledore looked at the massive figure that was poking its food despondently. "Please don't come back."

(A/N John)

I'm aware that this chapter is somewhat dull by comparison to many others. The problem with actually having plot develop is that I am compelled to sometimes do that developing. In this case, there were many things that I needed to have happen in

order to move forward with several plots that are going to come up later. I hope the Out-Take makes up for it.

(A/N 2 John)

Oddly enough, this isn't filler. I didn't type this up trying to make sure I had a chapter, I just had a bunch of things that needed to get done and they wouldn't have fit if they had happened at a different point in time. Hence this.

(A/N 3 John)

Though the idea of Hari acting as a mercenary was definitely one that amused me. And again: I think I set at least three plot threads in motion in this chapter. Maybe four or five.

(A/N 4 John)

Not a lot else to say other than that this chapter was delayed by a day or two because of my need to vent bile over a recent... well, let's just say I'm not going to see the next Avengers movie.

-John Out

(A/N 1 Spoon)

John wanted me to mention a thank you to Tepheris for pointing out some inconsistencies that have since been fixed. I want to mention that I hate you Tepheris since I had to do the fixes and there were 25 of them in 7 separate chapters. But also, thank you.

The Party Was A Killer

Chapter 41: The Party Was A Killer

Hermione wasn't even slightly surprised when there was a swooshing sound behind her as she changed into her swimsuit. "Hari. I know how hard it is to hurt you, but I swear to all that is holy that if you do not leave this room right now, I *will* find a way."

"Hm?"

"OUT!"

"Oh." Hermione heard the sound of the door open and then the beginning of a tirade from her father as the door shut again. She finished changing and then stepped out to find her friend sitting on a beach chair, ignoring her father's attempts to make clear that peeping on his daughter was not okay. She covered her face with her hands; her father was not only shouting, but trying to strangle her friend, who was having a conversation with her mother while holding her father's hands away from his neck, apparently unaware of the fact.

"Hey, Hermione. How's your summer?" Hari raised his voice slightly to be heard over her father, who was now trying to get his hands free for what Hermione assumed was some other murder-related reason.

"Not bad." She was trying to pretend that people weren't looking at them from around the beach house they'd rented for the month. People on the beach were staring because of the vitriol and threats being issued from an adult male towards a thirteen-year-old boy. "Though I hope we won't be spending time waiting for my father to get booked."

"You want him to stop?" Hari's foot suddenly swung up and impacted the man's jaw, silencing him as his eyes rolled back in his head and

he dropped to the wooden deck. "There." He looked at her father. "Why would he be 'booked'?"

"Threatening to hurt a minor." Hermione sighed as her mother went to check her husband's vitals.

"Who?"

"You."

"Those were threats?" Hari cocked his head. "Does it count if it can't be done?"

"Yes, it does."

"Huh. There's a thing. Other than that, things are going well?"

Hermione sat down in the chair vacated by her mother. "Well enough. I think I'm becoming used to you."

"When you say 'well enough' you mean that your homework is done."

"Well, I wanted to make sure I had time..."

"Of course. Have you been practicing?"

"That's what I've been forgetting. Hey, mom! I can finally show you magic!"

As Hari vanished, he heard someone shout "holy shit, she just levitated that guy!"

x

x

"Hi, Pansy!"

"GAH!" Pansy whirled to see her... friend (after two years, she was accepting that she had friends, but sometimes it was still a little odd for her to think about) standing beside her with a motorcycle.

"I thought I'd go riding with you."

"That's nice, but—" Pansy stopped talking as her clothes were transfigured into jeans and a t-shirt, the shawl she'd been wearing becoming a leather jacket. The sapphire slippers on her feet were turned into steel-capped boots... with flowers made of sapphires on the buckles.

"There you go." There was a pop and her bike was next to her. "Now you can ride."

"Hari!" she snapped.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to a *party!* "

"In that?"

After two years of exposure to Hari, even if it had been heavily indirect, Pansy didn't let out the primal scream that she felt welling up. "Change my clothes back!"

"Not until you ride with me."

"I need to go to that party! My parents are expecting me."

"So? We'll ride there."

"It's a hundred miles from here!"

"And?"

"I'm supposed to be there in three minutes!"

"We'll ride fast. You'll be fashionably late."

"No."

"I'm not changing your clothes back until you do."

"I'll go have my parents do it."

"They just left through the floo."

"How do you know that?"

"Trade secret."

"Pipery!" A House Elf appeared next to her. "Where are my parents?"

"The Mistress and Master just left for the party. Young Miss will be late now and has ruined her good clothes," added the elf disapprovingly.

"I hate you," she said to Hari. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not if you want your clothes back."

"Mistress will be most upset," added the elf. "Those was special clothes for the party."

"Fine." Pansy swung herself onto her bike. "I know I've been practicing, but do you know how to..." she trailed off as Hari popped a wheelie and roared down the grass towards the gates of the property. She sighed at the damage to the lawn and opened the throttle on her own bike, tearing after him into dusk. "HARI!" she shouted after him, "You might want to know where the party is!"

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Considering the lack of a direct route to their destination, Pansy was aware that they had made incredible time. Her parents had gone ahead to mingle with their hostess before the party proper began and somehow Hari was riding up a formerly immaculate lawn only about an hour after Pansy should have been there (since she had already missed the pre-party mingling). She pulled up alongside him at the foot of the steps up to the manor-house's main entrance.

"How did you manage to avoid traffic? I don't think we had to drop below a hundred twenty the entire ride."

"Trade secret."

Pansy dismounted. "Now, how do I get my bike home?" there was a pop. "Never mind." Her glance swept down her... *muggle* ensemble. It was comfortable and practical, but still... "Hari. I want my dress back."

Hari shrugged. "Sure."

Pansy looked herself over again as best she could. She was once again wearing a white dress with blue snakes embroidered climbing up the sides. Thankfully, he'd restored her shawl and gloves. A quick check revealed that her slippers had returned as well. "And my hair." It was incredibly odd to feel her hair just suddenly revert to the complex mess of black locks and hair pins without moving to be styled.

"Have fun, Pansy!" Hari shredded more defenseless grass as he blew passed the gates and out into the night.

It was about then that Pansy realized the change in support. "Did he..." She slipped behind a hedge and glanced down. "He did..." She stomped back around the hedge and up the steps, brushing by the man who'd been standing ready to announce the latecomers.

x

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Daphne looked up to see Pansy storming over with a look on her face that said Hari was involved. It was familiar. "What kept you?" she asked.

Pansy stared at her with enough venom that for a moment, Daphne feared that her sort-of friend was going to try and kill her. Finally, she spoke. "Hari took my dress and wouldn't give it back until I rode here on my motorcycle." There was a snicker from an older teen who was nearby. "Not like that! He transfigured it into muggle riding clothes."

Daphne closed her eyes for a moment. "And you rode with him?"

"Yes."

"Together."

"Yes."

"That's interesting."

Pansy looked at her sort-of leader for a long minute and then looked down at her chest and, for some reason, blushed, turning her nearly paper-white skin rosy. Then she walked calmly to one of the floating drink-trays and took a goblet of firewhiskey. Daphne watched the girl gulp it in a single swallow and let the fire curl out of her mouth.

"You okay, Pansy?"

"..." Pansy's eyes were closed and she seemed to be enjoying the fire still licking from her lips. "Assuming my parents don't get wind of this. So no."

"Anything I can do?"

Pansy sighed. "Not really."

X

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"Hey, Hari." Tracy didn't even look up from her dinner when she heard a swooshing noise. She didn't jump when the report from her mother's new firearm echoed in the small room and a hole appeared in the wall behind her. "Nice of you to drop in."

Hari had watched the bullet miss him with interest, having dodged well in advance. "Enjoying your new weapon?" he enquired of Clare. The redhead was grinning hugely.

"Hey there. I've been hoping you'd drop by."

"No more guns!" insisted her husband.

"Not for that. I wanted to ask you a question, Hari."

"Yeah?"

"Did you do this?" She held up the month's edition of *Soldier of Fortune*. "It doesn't say your surname, but I had a feeling that it might be you."

Hari looked innocent. "Why would you say that?"

"Just a feeling, really."

"Well in that case, no."

"That means 'yes', mom," explained Tracy.

"I did work that out for myself, dear." Clare turned to Hari. "Got any business, yet?"

Hari shook his head. "Nope. But I figure someone will need the job done right."

"It's cool that I'm able to talk to someone actually advertising in *Soldier of Fortune*. I wonder..." Clare stared off into space for a

moment. "Hon? Do you think that Lazo might know someone who needs work done?"

Her husband looked up when he realized she'd been speaking to him. "Is he the one with the trench coat, the piles of ammunition, and makes house calls in a BMW?"

"Yep."

"What kind of work?"

"Wet."

"What? Oh. He seems like the type." He considered. "Why?"

"I thought I'd pass along Hari's name."

"That's nice. Wait."

Tracy, meanwhile, had been chatting with Hari about who he had visited so far and was smothering her laughter at Hermione's fate and what had happened to Pansy. "You knocked him out right there on the beach?"

"Well, yeah."

"Did she try to kill you?"

"Nah. She wanted to show her parents magic."

"On a Muggle beach?"

"I guess."

"Oh." Tracy tried not to think about that for a moment. "You transfigured Pansy's clothes?"

"Dresses aren't good for riding a motorcycle."

"Did you revert everything?"

"Of course."

"Wait, you made her ride all the way to the party? The one being hosted by the Quince matriarch?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Hey, dad?"

"Yes?"

"The... Quinces. Are they part of your old crowd?"

"Yeah. Stay away from them, Tracy."

Tracy looked back at Hari. "Oh gods."

"I should go have some dinner. I still want to visit Daphne." Hari vanished in a cloud of fire.

Tracy looked at her mother and father. "I... I really hope my friends don't die tonight."

X

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Daphne didn't realize that someone was behind her until she saw Pansy's scowl. The pale girl had almost managed to relax a bit after the glass of alcohol had worked its way into her system. Now she had a dark look again. "How long have you been there, Hari?"

"About five minutes. Why?"

"Just wondering how much time I have before-"

"HARIHARIHARIHARIHARI!" A blonde missile was shoving its way through the crowd, wearing a dark green dress and a red-and-orange mask with one visible eye. She launched herself at Hari, who stepped to the side. Astoria slammed into Daphne, who collided with Pansy, who had just grabbed another glass of firewhiskey. The drink went flying.

It didn't fly long, landing on a trio of women and bursting into a brief flame that set them screaming and running through the party as though on fire.

While his friends picked themselves up, Hari observed a large woman wearing a purplish dress that made her look rather like a blimp with a gray beehive on top. Her already expansive form swelled as she drew in breath.

"WHO are you?" Her accent was thickly upper crust. "How did you get in here?"

"Hari. I came with Pansy."

"No. You didn't." Pansy paused. "Lady Quince, may I introduce you to Hari Potter, the one who 'saved' us from the Dark Lord."

The woman looked somewhat conflicted. Then she glanced around and noticed that there wasn't a single person who hadn't been acquitted of acting under the Imperius.

"You mean how I helped all those weak-willed losers who let themselves be controlled and then begged like bitches for mercy?"

Pansy twitched while Daphne covered her face with her hands.

"OUT!" The woman gestured imperiously towards the door.

"Eventually. Do you have anything good to eat?" He turned and trotted over to the buffet, where he started to pick up various

foodstuffs and then toss them over his shoulder with vague dismissals of quality.

The hostess looked around again. No one here would miss the Boy-Who-Lived. She hissed the incantation to a dark cutting curse and stared at the ruin of her table as Hari stepped slightly to the side to examine the punch.

Hari whirled, pointing a breadstick and screamed "FINITE!" As he did, he manipulated a bit of magic. The Lady Quince turned into a facsimile of Lockhart. "It's Lockhart! Everyone run!"

There were several minutes of panic that Hari spent sitting in a comfortable chair and watching the chaos while Pansy and Daphne stood next to him, trying to grasp how he had done so much damage. Eventually, calm was restored when everyone noticed that Lockhart had been stunned and someone pointed out that this was probably another prank.

The general consensus became that someone had pranked Lady Quince by transfiguring her into Lockhart and that the Potter brat had canceled a glamour cast over her. It was further decided that instead of ending the party early to try and sort it out, that it could be dealt with later.

Hari watched from the armchair. "Girl-Tobi?" There was a sudden presence beside him. "I need you to do something for me."

"Okay!"

X

X

Daphne and Pansy had made their way back to the buffet and returned with suspicious looks.

"What is my sister up to?" asked Daphne.

"I'm sorry?"

"I just saw her sneaking out of the party just now."

"She's probably looking for the bathroom."

"*Probably*, yes. However, I doubt it."

"I asked her to check if there was anything valuable to break as revenge."

Daphne sighed.

"Hey, Hari! I broke two expensive-looking vases to get back at her. And then I hid the pieces so she can't repair them."

"Thank you, Girl-Tobi."

"How's your summer been, Daphne?" Hari asked as she sat down on a divan.

"Until you showed up? Quiet. I'm better at silencing charms than Astoria is at removing them."

"Unlike mine, which has been filled with complaints about me 'going muggle'," grumbled Pansy. "My parents are not pleased with the motorcycle."

There was a bang as the door was kicked in. "AURORS. NOBODY MOVE!"

Hari's eye spun wildly. Magic gathered and then from out of a cluster of guests, frozen in place by shock, a beam of light shot out and tore into an auror's chest, leaving the cavity there more literal than before. A voice shouted, "death to the aurors! Long live the Dark Lord!"

The aurors responded with a volley of stunning spells. Except for the five trainees, who conjured jagged blades and banished them in

whirling clouds into the cluster from which the spell had come.

A moment later, one of the other guests drew his wand and screamed "Kill the aurors, my fellow Death Eaters! Before they can report back! For the Dark Lord!" and fired the killing curse. After that, things got a bit confused.

"Come on!" Hari pointed at a wall, which exploded. He grabbed Daphne and Pansy's hands and dragged them towards the opening.

"Pansy?"

"Yeah?"

"Old homes like these usually have some kind of reinforcement charms, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"So that..."

"Wasn't normal. Yes."

"Just checking."

X

X

Hari had insisted that the girls stay in place even after the screams and explosions died down. He offered to check on things and poked his head out of the opening he'd made, dodging several lethal attacks and two stunners.

"Professor Potter!" the lethal attacks stopped instantly, though it took a moment or two longer before the stunners ceased.

"Hello, Rosier. How's life in the aurors treating you?"

"Pretty well, Professor. It's much nicer that I get to use my skills *and* have people happy with me. Mum and dad aren't thrilled, but it's a respectable career."

"You're Professor Potter?" asked the auror with a captain badge.

"For a month or so, yes."

"Please note," said the man as he held his arms out to the sides, "that my hands are nowhere near my wand. Please note that my officers *also* are not reaching for their wands. I'm talking to you, Smythe!"

"Not to worry; I'd know if you were going to try to kill me."

"Right. Well, as you can see, we're taking in the live ones for questioning and the dead will be seen to. The injured too."

"Mhmm." Hari walked over to a moaning form. "Who did this one?"

"Me, Professor Potter."

"What did I tell you about maiming, Hayes? His arm is still half-on."

"I'm sorry, Professor! He was behind two people. I got both of them!"

"You come over here and finish what you started."

"Yes, sir!"

"Umm..." began the auror captain. "You *do* know that prisoners aren't to be injured, right?"

"They aren't?" asked Hari as the trainee came over.

"No, Professor," said Hayes. "Stop resisting!" he screamed at the comatose figure, then fired a cutting hex that severed the arm. "We don't hurt prisoners," he explained as he cauterized the wound.

"If you say so."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to finish my job," said the captain.

"Not to worry. Can I take some young people home?"

"How young?" asked the captain, looking at a sixteen year old with a glassy expression and several bits of shrapnel in her chest.

"Thirteen?"

"Sure, sure. We're taking everyone else in." He gestured to several adults who weren't injured but had slightly shell shocked expressions. "Lord and Lady Greengrass, for example."

"I'll tell their daughters not to worry."

X

X

"Good news, bad news." Hari said.

"Oh?"

"So your parents are going to be questioned, but you are free to go," Hari replied. "I'm not so sure about yours, Pansy. I think they're going to Hospital for injuries first."

"Oh."

"So I'll see you guys tomorrow." House Elves wearing towels with the Hogwarts crest appeared and grabbed onto the girls, vanishing in a series of pops.

X

X

==OUT TAKE==

Hari was sitting on the desk at the front of the classroom with a half-dozen men all sporting orange hair and gratuitous body jewelry. The group also had eyes that... were about as odd as the one of Hari's that was regularly visible.

"Hello, class," Hari began.

"Hey, Hari," said Tracy, without a hint of deference. "Who's this?"

"This is my Uncle, Pein."

"Your uncle is named 'pain'?" asked Daphne.

"No. This is 'Pein'."

"That's one of them. Who're the rest of them?"

"This is my Uncle Pein," replied Hari.

"And the others?"

"This is my Uncle Pein." Hari pointed at another one. "This is my Uncle Pein." And again. "This is my Uncle Pein." Again. "This is my Uncle Pein." He pointed at a fifth. "This is my Uncle Pein." The last one. "This is my Uncle Pein."

"They're all your Uncle Pein?"

"Yep."

"Not possible," snapped Hermione. "No one has successfully cloned anyone yet."

A duplicate of Hari formed in a puff of smoke. "There. That's done. Moving on. My Uncle will be helping us by allowing us to do live exercises teaching how to deal with multiple enemies who are making optimal decisions."

X

X

Pein's fist slammed into Millicent's face. She staggered back a pace, but no further. "That's odd," commented Pein who Hari knew to be the primary 'Pein'. "I didn't pull my punch *that* much."

Millicent's fist struck Pein, turning his head to the side. "Ow, ow, ow." Mille was looking down at her hand. "Stupid spikes. Am I bleeding?"

"Heavenly Gaze of the Omnipresent god." The large girl flew across the room and smashed into the wall, sending up a cloud of stone shards and debris. "Yes."

She climbed out of the hole, wiping blood from her lip. "You hurt me." Pein just stared at her. "No one but my mom's hurt me since I was four!"

Hari blinked. Then he walked over to her and punched her in the nose.

"Ow! Fuck!" Millie clutched her nose as blood ran down her face. She glared at Hari. "Why?"

"I didn't want to be left out." He caught her fist absently and kicked her away.

"I hate it when you do that." She dragged herself out of the pile of splinters that had been a desk and walked up to Pein, holding out her hand. "Good fight."

Pein's gaze measured her for a moment. Then he took her hand. When she flipped him over her shoulder with a triumphant 'Hah!' she quickly followed it with 'what the-' when he held onto her hand as he continued the motion to land on his feet and fling her into the hole he'd already made. "Good 'fight'."

X

X

"I would like to... thank... our guest lecturer today. With the exception of the class involving the Second Year Slytherins, my castle seems to have sustained a remarkably small amount of structural damage and no one appears to have acquired any new nightmare-fodder. Compared to our recent guests, I find your restraint positively thrilling." Dumbledore paused and leaned down to listen to McGonagall. "Ah. I am told that, in fact, the Sixth Year NEWT class was doing their exercises in the Forbidden Crater and that, as a result, the Crater is now much larger and I now have reason to believe that some of the mines therein have been scattered onto previously safe parts of my lawn. Given that I can now no longer be certain that unforbidden areas of the school grounds are safe, I must revise my earlier assessment: you are possibly the worst so far. Please never return."

(A/N John)

See. This is the thing about setup. I had to have a chance to get things ready. And some stuff is still waiting to happen further along.

(A/N 2 John)

I'm glad to see people got the reference to the A-Team.

(A/N 3 John)

And Pansy gets the beginnings of character growth. Yay. This wasn't intentional. Sort of. I mean, we'd planned on having her grow, but this wasn't what we'd expected.

(A/N 4 John)

Most of this is Spoon's fault, though. She was the one who suggested Pansy be on her way to a party.

(A/N Spoon)

I'd like to point out this is what I mean when I talk about the John effect. I suggest Pansy goes to a party and it turns into a massacre. So really, anything he claims is my fault is entirely his doing. I hold no blame whatsoever. Yeah.

Six Times Nine

Chapter 42: Six Times Nine

... or Check Ins, Gaol, and Ice Cream Topping

"Hey, Daphne."

The girl didn't move from her bed. From somewhere, she had acquired an eye-mask and was using it to keep out the morning sunlight. "What do you want, Hari?"

"I was checking to see how you're doing."

There was a pause. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I think that's my line," replied Hari.

"It's too early for this. I'm fine. My parents woke us up when they got home at three in the morning, so I'm trying to get back to sleep."

"Good, good."

"Hari?" there was silence. Daphne smiled slightly and went back to sleep.

X

X

"Hello, Hari."

"Hi, Pansy."

Pansy was sitting in her room, wearing nightclothes and apparently waiting for him, to judge from her expression. "My father lost an arm last night."

"I saw."

"I should probably be mad at you."

"Why?"

"It was your fault." Pansy growled.

"I don't think I made him fling some kind of purple-fire-thing at the aurors. That was why they replied."

Pansy blanched slightly. Then she sighed and covered her eyes with her hand. "I wish I were completely surprised." There was a strange look on her face as her eyes teared up a little. "I should be upset. I really should. But all I could think last night was how it was the first peace I'd had since I got home!"

Hari shrugged and sat on her bed as the tears began to fall, watching her sit in the chair in front of her vanity. "Your mother is home now, I see."

"Yeah. She got home after sunup and was already ranting about the evil aurors who maimed my dad."

"And wrecked his wand."

"Oh. I don't think they realized that yet."

"Rosier did good work there."

Pansy sniffled for a moment and then blinked. "Wait. What?"

"One of my Seventh Year students."

"So it *is* your fault!"

"I stand by my previous position." He ignored the jar of makeup that missed him completely. He hadn't moved. "Your aim needs work."

"And now I just wonder if it will be more or less peaceful after my father returns from Saint Mungo's."

"I think the aurors might want a word with him first."

"We're pretty rich. It's not an issue."

"Of course. I should send Rosier a letter and remind him to be vigilant for corrupted comrades. See you, Pansy!" He vanished in a cloud of fire.

Pansy sighed. "He's getting better. Ish." She closed her eyes. "I wonder if I can go back to school early this year?"

X

X

Hari handed the letter to the Ministry owl he'd ambushed. It had taken a bit of work to convince it to take the letter anyway, but eventually his refusal to return its missive had done the trick. Hari strolled towards the Quince manor and looked around. She had annoyed him and he wanted to be sure he remembered where to tell them to look. He had no idea what she had in those buried caches, but people rarely kept things in places like that if they didn't mind everyone seeing them.

He considered waylaying another owl, but decided to do things the other way. Besides, he wanted to see how the guards had improved.

X

X

Hari trotted away from Buckingham Palace lighter by one letter. It would be worth it to see if the aurors acted on his information. In the meantime, he'd added some notes on how to improve security to give him a challenge. Maybe next time he'd have some fun.

X

X

"Hey, Blaise!"

"Hello, Hari." Blaise looked up from the *Daily Profit* and considered the boy in front of him. "You've had a busy summer."

"Nah. Boring, really. Though I got chewed out by my Uncle..."

"And making trouble in Diagon Alley?"

"What happened there?"

"Uh-huh. And you also caused a massive fight with aurors in the home of a significant and powerful Pureblood family."

"I'm a bit lost, Blaise. What are you talking about this time?"

"Last night, someone turned Lady Quince into a copy of Gilderoy Lockhart. Someone anonymously tipped the aurors about Lockhart's presence and when they showed up, someone attacked them and Gregory Goyle Sr. declared for the Dark Lord and then things got out of hand."

"Shocking."

"Indeed. I'm just glad you didn't get the girls killed."

"Who?"

"Daphne and her sister were at the party along with Pansy. They could have been hurt."

"Oh. That would have been bad."

"Thank you for that, Hari."

"Where's your mom?"

"Why?" Blaise had a dark look on his face.

"Because I'd normally see her by now and she's not in your house."

"Ah. Well. She's at her fiance's bedside, trying to get the marriage sorted out before he dies of his wounds sustained at a party last night. Natural causes, you know. He *did* try to kill an auror."

"Yeah?"

"I think she just needs him to sign."

"Who is it, anyway?"

"Um... I think it was Ferro O'Bansonson."

"What's he look like?"

"Pasty, kind thin. Very old. Graying hair and I think he has cataracts, given that his eyes are cloudy."

"She might have trouble with that."

"Why?"

"Jugson severed his arms."

"Oh. Well, I'm sure she'll find a way."

"Forgery is always a good option. That's what my Uncle Sasori always says."

"Nah. Magical ways of identifying it. Maybe she'll have him put the quill in his mouth."

"I think I remember him having some brain damage, too."

"How do you know?"

"Know what?"

"What kind of damage he sustained?"

"Magic."

Blaise opened his mouth. Then he closed it again. "That's a lousy answer."

"Magic."

"Yeah. Yeah."

"I need to go visit Millie still."

"Wow!" Blaise whirled to see his mother in the doorway. "You're already bringing boys over while I'm out. You're an early bloomer, baby boy."

"MOM!"

"And aren't you looking handsome, Hari?" she purred. "Won't you blush for me?"

"How went your hospital visit?"

"It went well, Hari. Thanks for asking. He woke up long enough to say 'I do' and then died of his wounds." She sniffled theatrically. "I feel his loss keenly. We'd been together almost a month!" She smiled suddenly. "But I met a nice, rich Pureblood who was visiting a relative."

Blaise sighed.

"Right. Good luck with that?" Hari offered. "I'm going to visit Millie."

"I sent her a letter a few days ago and she hasn't replied yet," said Blaise.

"I'll ask her why."

X

X

"Hey, Millie."

"Hi, Hari." Millicent said over her shoulder. "Do me a favor and hold this guy for me?"

Hari shrugged and, as Millie walked away from the wall, grasped the large man by the neck, his fingers pale over the bruises of Millie's large hands, and held the man against the brickwork. The terrified look in the man's eyes suggested that seeing the scrawny kid a foot shorter than Millicent treat holding him off the ground as a casual activity was not doing his nerves any good.

Hari watched with interest as Millicent grabbed two men who'd broken legs off of a table and bashed their heads together violently before using them as a pair of clubs to bludgeon several other men into oblivion. He absently adjusted his grip so that he could snap the man's neck if he needed to.

"Not bad," he said. "You might want to work on your technique, though. You could probably have knocked that last one out with only one swing if you'd angled it better."

Millie shrugged. Then she charged the last man standing and rammed her shoulder into his stomach until his back smashed into a wall with a crunch. "I don't get enough practice." She raised her voice, "alright lads; it's safe now!" As she spoke, she went up to the man Hari was holding and sucker-punched him in the mouth before dusting off her hands.

"Millie?"

"Yes, Hari?"

"Why are you in jail?"

"My mom said that I'd have more fun here than at home, so she didn't bother to bail me out. Besides, I figured you'd be by sooner or later to get me out if I needed it."

"Alright then."

"Besides, I slugged an auror and they took it badly."

"Why?"

"I was in Diagon Alley a week or so ago when the aurors started flinging spells. One of them nearly hit me and so I punched him in the face and then I was stunned and the next thing I remember was waking up in a cell."

"There's a thing."

"Yeah. I had a cell to myself. The Warden said something about having been a guard here a while back and remembering my mother." Millie grinned. "He told me that after her first time in jail, he never made her share a cell with anyone because there aren't House Elves and no one likes to clean the stuff off the walls."

"Makes sense."

"And my mum is so jealous of me, too."

Hari watched as a few witches and wizards who'd entered the room cautiously now went about carefully stunning the people on the ground and stacking them up to the side. "Why is that?"

"Thanks, m'Lady!" called over a somewhat portly man. "We'll add it to your tally!"

"Because I'm being paid by the number of riots I break up while here. Compared to my mum, these guys are a cakewalk. After I broke up a riot by accident, they offered to pay me. They have to keep moving me around the jail, though, because people don't want to riot after I break it up." Millicent pouted, which was a horrifying sight.

"Blaise asked why you didn't reply to his letter," Hari said after a moment.

"Oh. Right. Prisoners aren't allowed quills."

"Why not?"

"They're sharp."

"And?"

"Prisoners aren't allowed things that can be used as weapons."

"Everything in this room can be used as a weapon. Even the prisoners themselves-you proved that."

"Hari, I'm not sure that there is much inherent danger in, for example," she pointed to a bowl that hadn't been upended, "butterscotch pudding."

"Well, that guy over there is allergic to it," replied Hari, pointing at one of the unconscious prisoners.

"Enough to kill him, though?"

"And you could force someone to eat so much of it that their stomach explodes."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Warden, but I think the guards feel that they would notice before that happened." The portly man nodded and kicked one of the recumbent prisoners a few times to make sure he wasn't faking. Then he produced a hatpin and jabbed it into the

man's testicles and nodded in satisfaction when there was no response.

"And, of course, you could just shove someone's face into it and let them drown."

"Except for Ron Weasley. He'd eat his way out."

"Not to put too fine a point on it," interrupted the Warden as he waddled over. "But who in the blazes are you?"

"I'm Hari. I'm a friend of Millie and I was just visiting her."

"And how the hell did you get in here?"

"Magic."

The Warden frowned. "I hate that answer."

"Magic. Anyway, I was going to take her home, but she seems to be having fun, so I'll let her enjoy her vacation. Do you want me to give your family a message, Millie?"

"Just that mum was right and she should bribe them to drop the charges when it's time for school."

"Okay. I'll give her a punch for you also."

Hari vanished in a ball of flame and the Warden blinked. "M'Lady? What the fuck just happened?"

"Hari," replied Millie, as if that explained everything.

X

X

His visit with Millie's parents had gone well. He'd hit her mother in the jaw hard enough to stun her (those weights were paying off) and

told them about when to bribe Millie out of jail. He only had a couple weeks left before school was supposed to begin when a call came in for him.

"New Dawn Branch Office, Director Hari speaking." Hari listened to the scratchy voice at the other end of the line and made a few quick notes to read with his Sharingan so he could memorize them. "Uh-huh. No survivors."

Hari wondered if Clare had come through for him and this was someone related to her friend. It didn't really matter one way or the other, though, because he had a job. The fee was lower than he'd like, but considering this was his first mission in the region, it wasn't too shocking that he couldn't charge full price.

Hari boarded the flight to the Congo with amusement. It was funny that they'd searched him for weapons before the flight. It wasn't as though he needed them. On the other hand, what was so funny was the fact that they'd missed the entire arsenal he had on him. No ninja would have been so lax.

His cloak drew some comment, but he ignored it as any member of the Akatsuki would and just settled into his seat in coach. He'd brought no magazines, but just closed his eyes and began to read several magazines he'd memorized.

X

X

Hari hummed as he walked away from the rebel compound. That was unfair; there was no compound, but he was definitely walking away from a place that had one time held a rebel compound, even if the only evidence of that now was a large circle of blackened ground where it had once sat. He'd taken pictures for his employer and even taken the extra trouble of tracking down any rebels who'd been out of the camp at the time and killed them too. That had taken him a

few extra hours. Compared to the time it took to deal with the compound, it was most of the effort.

It wasn't the stuff of legends, but it would bring in a nice paycheck considering the work required. It more than covered his flights and would leave him with a pleasant profit besides. And he would hope that he would be called on in future endeavors.

X

X

Hermione was on the platform, hugging her parents goodbye when she heard an animal yelp.

X

X

==OUT TAKE==

"Good afternoon, class," said Hari. He sat on his desk, playing with an origami lotus with a thousand petals. Next to him was a tall, lithe woman with-well, there was no way to get around it-blue hair. "This is our guest instructor for the day, my Aunt Konan."

The woman gave a slight bow and several people noticed the paper flower tucked behind an ear. Most of the girls were observing the body piercings they could see with confusion. The boys were paying attention to how her top ended well above her navel. "If you don't stop drooling, I'm going to hurt you," she growled.

"Miss?" asked one of the girls. "Did the Weasley twins get you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your hair. Did they prank you?"

"Nah," replied Hari. "My Aunt just has a normal hair color. You not so much." The girl in question had blonde hair.

"Today, class, we will be looking at the weapon possibilities inherent in one of the most ubiquitous objects: paper."

"Wizards use parchment," commented a muggleborn.

"It's still easy to come by and useful." Konan held up a sheet of letter paper. "Dangerous? Not so much." She fiddled with it for a moment and then threw the resulting shape, slicing off the ear of a Sixth Year who was staring at her and drooling. "And yet, I just removed an extremity with it."

Hari levitated stacks of paper over to the desks. "We're going to be starting with a basic blade-form. And remember that it's easier to conjure paper than it is to conjure iron."

X

X

Dumbledore looked out at a dinner scene much subdued and with most of the diners sporting bandages with healing salves under them. "I must 'thank' our recent guest lecturer for her discourse on the methods by which people may be dismembered by use of common materials such as paper.

"In light of that, I find that I am being lobbied by Filch to add all forms of paper to the list of forbidden items and it is difficult to argue with his position. While I am impressed by the number of intricate objects many of my students gifted me with, I am nevertheless concerned about the sudden upsurge in injuries today. I think that there are a grand total of fifteen students without at least one severe laceration or more serious wounds. This is troubling when we have otherwise had a somewhat injury-free year-petrifications notwithstanding.

"Additionally, I must announce the death of Beryl Toptower, a Seventh Year Gryffindor. The idiot died when he attempted to assault Professor Snape with his new paper throwing thingy and his Professor responded poorly to attempted murder and exploded his student all over the Potions classroom-incidentally causing the ruination of all the potions being prepared by the NEWT class at the time.

"Please," he said to the blue-haired woman, "do not ever darken my castle doors again."

(A/N John)

So this update is on the late side because I was in the final crunch for something and then was recovering from the exhaustion it entailed. With any luck, things will have gone well.

(A/N 2 John)

I understand people were expecting that Konan was going to be one of the sane ones. Hahahaha.

(A/N 3 John)

The next few chapters are excessively weird. Fun, but weird.

(A/N 4 John)

I feel it is a sign of Hari's increasing maturity as an individual that he actually checked in on his friends after a harrowing night. Pansy's life continues to get more... involved thanks to her friendship with Hari.

(A/N 5 John)

I am happy to report that things are going to seriously jump the rails shortly. Sort of. I mean, me and Spoon know what will

happen, but we're giving canon the ol' heave-ho (more than before).

(A/N 6 John)

Oh, and I should remind people that the Defense Professor has a difficult rabbit.

Transit To Insanity

Chapter 43: Transit to Insanity

Wherein the Hogwarts Express is Apparently Running Local and Doesn't Leave Until the Chapter Nearly Ends.

Hermione was stalking the corridors, looking for Hari when she bumped into Daphne. Like her yearmate, she was levitating her trunk, though without noticing she was doing it. "Have you seen him?" she demanded.

"I assume you mean Hari?" Daphne's reply was distinctly cool. The two of them stood to the side as a trio of First Years were chased down the hall by a blonde in a mask, cackling gleefully. Daphne grabbed her sister's shoulder. "Where's Hari?"

"Compartment right at the front." The masked girl twitched her fingers, sending one young student sprawling .

"Aren't the Prefects entitled to those?" asked Hermione as she watched the blonde tackle the boy her age and proceed to tickle him while he begged for mercy and wet himself.

"And you think Hari will let that bother him?" Astoria had climbed off the lad and pulled a giant, inflated mallet from somewhere before giving chase after the other two.

"Don't you think the Prefects might?"

"It's possible." Daphne began to walk towards the front of the train.

X

X

What the two of them found was a trio of upper years with a conspicuous lack of wands, but the expressions that said they were authority figures dealing with Hari Potter. Under normal circumstances, the three would have had their wands out and been attempting to use spells, but there was a wariness that all of Hari's students had when contemplating the idea of attempting anything that might be considered aggressive-a caution only enhanced by the events of the summer and their former peers' responses to even the suggestion of violence.

"Come on!" one girl with a badge was saying. "This is supposed to be a Prefect compartment. Please go somewhere else."

"No thanks," came the voice from inside. "I'm comfortable, thank you."

"She didn't ask if you're comfortable!" hissed a boy who was wearing the trim of a Seventh Year Prefect on his robes. "She asked if you would please move elsewhere. Please!"

"What do you think?" A pause. "Nah, I didn't think so. Sorry, I'm good."

"Urian, Farnsworthy," said the last of the Prefects. "Let's just kick some Firsties out of a compartment and enlarge it. We'll be less frustrated in the end."

"Fine. Fine." The boy sighed. He tromped off, scowling. He was followed by the two girls who shook their heads in frustrated sympathy.

Daphne and Hermione stepped into the compartment and stopped dead. Inside was something very different from the usual collection of benches and overhead racks. Instead, there were a half-dozen overstuffed chairs, a quartet of divans, cabinets with crystal fronts that revealed a selection of snacks, a suit of armor holding some kind of object with far too many sharp edges and spikes, an even dozen windows, only some of which looked out on the platform (the

others looked out at what Hermione recognized as the Globe Theatre, the Royal Opera House, Wimbledon, and what she was fairly sure was Parliament during a session a hundred years ago), and a roaring fire.

Hari was sprawled on a divan in front of the fire with a slim notebook in his hand, a pile of notebooks with what looked like excessively complex magical locks stacked up beside him, and a giant-if lean-black dog on a leash. The dog was industriously chewing on the lead with no sign of enjoyment and every appearance of a being hard at work at an important task.

"*This* is the Prefect cabin?" hissed Daphne.

"No." Hari turned a page and scribbled line after line of incomprehensible symbols. "Hi Hermione, Daphne. How're you?"

The two looked at each other. "Me first," they both said.

"Uh-huh." Hari continued to write.

"Me!"

Hari turned a page. He casually pulled a penny out of his pocket and flicked it at the two girls. "Hermione is heads."

The two looked at the coin as it landed. "Daphne it is."

"You got my parents arrested!"

"So? He almost got *me* arrested!"

Daphne ignored her friend. "Hari: you got my parents arrested! You got Pansy's dad's arm cut off!"

"If I recall, your parents were arrested for being friends with people trying to kill aurors." Hari paused. "No, I tell a lie: who killed aurors. Oh, and not just being friends, but actually being at the party where the murders in question took place."

Daphne stared at him. In two years, she'd never heard him be so coldly blunt before. "I'm still fairly certain you caused it. And you definitely cut off Pansy's dad's arm!"

"I think that was Goyle's dad attacking the aurors and screaming for everyone to attack in the name of some 'dark lord'. Also, that was my former student who dismembered Mister Pansy's dad and I had to make him go back and do the job properly."

Daphne goggled at him.

"What's bothering you, Hermione?"

"You almost got me arrested for violating the Statute of Secrecy!"

Hari closed his eye for a moment. "No. I don't remember doing that."

"I levitated my dad after you kicked him in the face! And Muggles saw!"

"Sounds like a violation alright."

"Hermione?"

"What?" snapped the girl, glaring at Daphne.

"Why aren't you under arrest?"

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X

"Why did you think it was a good idea to levitate your father in the middle of a crowded beach?" asked the Obliviator. "I'll need to see your wand, by the way."

"I'd wanted to show my mom magic and I needed to get my dad inside and, well, it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"In front of Muggles?"

"I forgot, okay?"

"And your wand?" the man sounded bored.

"I don't have it."

"Look, girl, telling me you don't have your wand won't do a bit of good..."

"I don't have it! I haven't had it for a year and a half. Not since Hari Potter took it from me!"

"Why does Professor Potter have your wand?" asked a young man wearing the robes of a trainee Obliviator. "Wait. You're Granger, right? You're one of his friends!"

The man who'd been questioning Hermione went pale. "One moment please." There were some hurried words between the trainer and trainee. Hermione didn't catch most of them, but she made out 'Diagon' and 'Pants-shitting fear'. The Obliviator walked back over. "Let's call this a horrible case of accidental magic. We'll take care of the coverup. Please don't do this again and PLEASE don't tell Professor Potter that we made trouble for you."

X

X

"I'm not really sure," said Hermione. "It was weird. I get the feeling it's Hari's fault somehow."

"Isn't everything?" muttered Daphne.

"According to Professor Snape. And what isn't, he blames me for anyway." Hari's tone was cheerful.

X

X

Fifteen minutes later, Blaise walked into the room. "Dear Merlin." He turned to Hari. "Never tell my mother about this. I don't want to hear about her trying to seduce Dumbledore so she can inherit this."

"Nah. He's gay."

"I'm not going to ask how you know," said Daphne.

"Seconded."

"Speaking of that," growled Blaise. "You know my mom keeps dropping broad hints about how if our relationship continues, we should ask one of our friends to surrogate for us?"

"What relationship?" asked Daphne.

"Hari's not going to be near my genetics, thank you very much," said Hermione at the same time.

"My mother thinks that I snuck Hari over to our villa while she was checking on her fiancé. She didn't just hint, really, she outright said it a few times. And she bought me *guides* ! And other... things. I saw her reading *So Your Wizard Likes Wands* !"

"Dear gods," muttered Daphne, covering her face.

"Why was your mom reading that?" asked Tracy as she walked into the room.

"Blaise's mom caught him having Hari over while she was out."

"Oh." Tracy blinked. "My mother is going to be so disappointed to hear that Hari is off the market."

"I'M NOT GAY!" screamed Blaise. "AND I AM MOST DEFINIELY NOT FUCKING HARI POTTER!" In the echoes, there was a sound of curiosity from the dog. "Great. Even the dog thinks I'm gay."

"Nah." Hari hadn't looked up from his notebook. "I know you're not having sex with me."

"Yeah. My mom is just doing it to mess with me. But it doesn't make it any less infuriating."

"Your mom teases you about your non-existent love life, too?" asked Tracy from her seat next to Daphne. "I thought it was just mine."

"No. My mom has been implying that Hari and I are having an affair since she first met him."

"You people have weird parents," said Hermione. She had pulled out *The Big Book of Runes You Don't Need to Know* and had opened to her bookmark near the back of the tome nearly as tall as she was.

"Speaking of my mother," said Tracy. "My mum asked that I pass a few messages. The first was just her making a noise I normally think of coming from teenage witches who are about to see Stubby Boardman in concert. She also said how cool it is to know someone who's now an active member of *Soldier of Fortune*. Then she asked me to pass alone a message from Lazo—that's her arms dealer... well, he was until you. Now he just gets her ammo—who said that you're an okay guy and you did good by the guys who he passed your info to. Also, he gave her a message to give you from them: they said something about nice work in the Congo or something, that no one's been making trouble since your intervention and that they'll be letting their friends know that there's an outfit that gets the job done."

"That's awesome!" Hari stopped writing to grin hugely. "Dad never founded his own mercenary organization."

"Hari..." Hermione started to speak and then stopped. She looked at Tracy. "If I ask for clarification, will I regret it?"

"Maybe? You might have some insight into a news story in the Paper."

"Which one?"

"You sure you want to know?"

"Not really."

Blaise had opened up a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and was buried in the crossword (which was three dimensional and mocked wrong answers). The headline read *Lockhart Robs London Bank, Steals 30,000 in Gold Bullion*. The article went on to detail how Lockhart had led a gang of brazen thieves who had charmed the owner of a pawn shop into thinking he had a day-job copying the dictionary in a small office while they tunneled into the bank using shovels and other muggle tools.

X

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Millicent walked in a while later, wearing new robes and grinning broadly. "I made a fortune! Thanks, Hari!"

"I will regret this," said Daphne. "Why are you thanking him?"

"The prison guards paid me lots of money to hit prisoners who were making trouble!" Millicent fairly glowed. "All because I slugged an auror during that incident in Diagon Alley."

"Wait." Blaise looked up from where he'd perched on the arm of Hermione's chair and been trying to read over her shoulder with obvious lack of understanding. "Were you in prison?"

"No!"

"Oh good."

"I was in *gaol*, silly."

"That's such a difference."

"Actually it is." Hermione had curtailed her reading to interject in a place where minutia was relevant. "Gaols are for people who are awaiting trial." She paused. "Or execution. Prisons are where people serve sentences. Azkaban, for example, is a prison."

"Exactly." Millie was still beaming. "I got to break up riots and stuff. Mum was so proud and so jealous that I got paid to do what she always did for free. Though she usually started the riot first. Maybe that's why they didn't pay her?"

"That actually sounds like a really good reason not to pay someone." Tracy seemed mildly amused.

"I'm sorry," said Blaise. "You didn't reply to my letters because you were *in gaol*?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you reply when you got out?"

"I was only released this morning. Mum paid them to lose the arrest record."

"Bribery?" demanded Hermione, in abject horror.

"Well, yeah."

"That's not right!"

"It's not?" Blaise sounded confused. "But that's how the system works, right?"

"Besides," said Hari, suddenly. "Are you saying you want Millie to still be in gaol?"

"What? No! But you shouldn't be able to just openly bribe the guards!"

"She didn't do that! She made a donation to Fudge's reelection campaign. And the Warden was really nice. He had a couple of the guards escort me to the platform and even had a guard make sure to get the stuff I needed from Diagon."

Blaise was patting Hermione's head. "Don't worry so much about it."

"But it's not right!"

"So you *do* want Millie to be in gaol."

"No!"

"Well, make up your mind." Blaise grinned. "Or just go back to your book."

Hermione subsided into grumbles as she returned to her reading. A moment later, she used magic to shove him off the arm of the chair. "Nice balance," she commented as she turned a page.

"We'll work on that along with your magic," said Hari.

"We'll what?"

"You won't be needing this." Hari was examining a wand. "Nice and clean." He snapped it in half. "I have too many of these lying around already."

"Blaise?"

"Yes, Tracy?" Blaise growled, staring at the two halves of his wand as Hari set them on fire.

"I'm totally writing to your mum to tell her Hari snapped your 'wand'."

"If you do, I will kill you."

"Don't you mean 'natural causes'?" asked Daphne.

"No."

"It was worthless anyway," added Hari. "I mean, it's just a stick."

"Maybe I should tell her that Hari had very deft hands when he grabbed your wand?"

"Seriously. I'll kill you." There was a sound from the dog before it went back to gnawing.

"You really don't need it. I'll make sure of that." Hari went back to make notes.

"You burned my wand!"

"I burned a piece of wood. Now stop complaining. You don't hear Daphne or Hermione upset."

"Anymore," growled Daphne. She watched as Hari somehow dodged the stinging hex she wandlessly shot at him and continued his work without seeming to notice.

"I could tell her Hari made you scream in front of a group of girls."

"Kill. You."

"Lay off him, Tracy." Hermione didn't look up from her own text. "Blaise needs as much peace as he can get. This year is going to be hard enough without you teasing him."

"Who's teasing?"

"Tracy."

"Fine. Fine."

"Do I get a say in this?" asked Blaise.

"No," replied Hermione, Daphne, and Hari.

"I had to go through hell, you can suffer it too," snapped Hermione.

"Agreed. Don't you whine or we'll beat you and then drag you downstairs to Hari."

"Isn't it nice that I didn't even have to threaten you?" asked Hari.

Blaise just glowered.

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Fifteen minutes after that, a harried-looking Pansy entered the compartment, with a slightly vacant look on her face.

"What happened to you?" asked Tracy.

"My father was... is not in the best of spirits. Losing his wand and his arm have not exactly endeared Hari to him. It's just good he's been on so many pain-killers; otherwise he'd be much more unpleasant." She rubbed her face. "And I... I..." she paused. "Never mind." She lay back on a divan and closed her eyes.

The dog whined for a moment, then trotted over and licked her hand.

She opened one eye and patted it. Then things registered. "Hari? What's that?"

"What's what?" asked Hari, setting aside his notebook and taking out a pad onto which he began to sketch some symbols.

"This dog."

"Oh. So you know what it is then and I don't need to tell you."

Hermione happened to glance up and began to stare at Hari's drawings.

"Hari?"

"Yes, Daphne?"

"Why do you have a dog?"

"I found him."

She sighed. "Where did you find him?"

"The platform."

"Hari... did you steal someone's pet?" asked Tracy.

"No. He's a mongrel stray. I'm going to keep him." There was a strange sound from the dog. "His name is Sprinkles." The sound this time was rather strangled. Then the dog went back to licking Pansy's fingers.

"Why is your dog licking me?"

"No idea. Is it annoying you?"

"A little."

"Okay." Hari yanked on the leash and the dog gave a choked yelp as it was pulled across the compartment.

"Hello, Tam," said Hari as he went back to his drawing.

The door slid open. "How did you know they've upgraded it."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Hari?" said Tracy. "Why is Ginny Weasley here? And why is she wearing a red and silver tie?"

"You didn't tell them?" demanded Tam.

"Tell them what?"

"Tell us what?"

"You really *didn't* tell them?"

"Tell them what?"

"Tell us *what?*"

Tam opened her mouth for a moment and then paused, apparently reconsidering. "I'm Tam Riddle. I was Ginny Weasley until Ginny did something very stupid to her soul. I am the result. My name is Tam unless you talk to anyone official-then it's still Ginny."

"Is that why your eyes are glowing red and you aren't acting like Ginny?" asked Blaise.

Tam paused again. "Yes. Yes, it is."

Everyone looked at Hermione.

"Don't look at me. I don't know anything about soul magic. That's seriously dark stuff and I'm not allowed in the restricted section."

"There's nothing in there anyway," said Hari. "Though I'm not sure why you let a minor detail like that stop you. I thought we'd dealt with that."

"If you're the result of dark magic, aren't you a dark creature? Or, at least, evil?" said Millie.

"Definitely not and not really. Just impatient."

"Speaking of that, do you want to learn wandless magic with Blaise?" asked Hari.

"I already know wandless magic."

"You do ?" Hermione sounded more annoyed than surprised.

"I guess you don't need this." Hari held up Ginny's (now Tam's) wand and then set it on fire.

"You. You."

"Kind teacher who will instruct you in wandless magic. Very good, Tam." Hari finished her sentence and went back to drawing.

Tracy grinned hugely. "Blaise, should I tell your mum that you're jealous that Hari is handling someone else's wand? Or that you're okay with that?"

"TRACY!" snapped Hermione just before Blaise tried to jump over and strangle the redhead, who accidentally dodged as she fell onto the floor, clutching her stomach.

"I realize that this seems a bit out of nowhere," said Pansy, still lying on the divan. "But why do your house colors appear to be red and silver?"

"I'm in a bit of Gryffindor and a bit of Slytherin. Professor Dumbledore said that I was very Gryffindor for... reasons. But that I could be in Slytherin if I wanted. I chose the option that keeps me away from *this* ." Tam reached outside the compartment and dragged in a Girl-Tobi who looked sheepish in as much as could be seen with a mask on. "I found this... thing having cornered a few First Years and was tickling them until they gave her their pocket change."

Daphne covered her face in her hands.

"Hari?" said Tam. "Please tell me you aren't planning to charge that rune-set. Or that you'll warn me so I can be elsewhere."

"Why?" asked Hermione.

"Because I'm fairly certain that it would conjure chlorine gas."

"Oh."

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The train was nearing Hogsmeade when Hari put away his sketch pad and leaned back. "That's interesting."

"Oh no!"

Tam cocked her head. "Why do you say that, Parkinson?"

"Whenever Hari finds something interesting, some sort of monster is abroad."

Tam gave a weak, forced laugh. "You don't say."

The room started to get cold. Breath began to smoke. "Oh. Oh shit." Tam was glaring at Hari. "I could *really* use my wand right now." She went over to the cabinets and tore one open. Chocolate frogs were hurled over her shoulders at people. "We'll need these." A pause. "Assuming we're around to need it."

Pansy curled up and began to sob quietly. Soon after, most of the others were in similarly unhappy states. Millicent seemed mostly confused, Tam was just gritting her teeth, and Sprinkles was curled up around Pansy's arm and whining. Hari just seemed intrigued.

"You *do* know they'll eat our souls, right?" hissed Tam. She paused. "They'll try to eat our souls, anyway."

"Yeah." Hari frowned and looked at his friends. "They're also why everyone's like that, right?"

"Yes." Tam's eyes were more like glowing embers than their earlier gleam. "It's not fun."

"Oh." The compartment door slid open. "Well fuck that, then." Something bright flashed across the open space between Hari and the door and then there was a thunk and a blood-curdling scream of pain and confused rage. There was a sensation of dozens of shapes flooding off the train and then then the cold receded even as the shrieking continued.

Tam's eyes began to return to their usual brightness. "That..." she stared at where the cloaked form was clawing desperately at something embedded in the middle of its hooded head that apparently had pinned it to the wall. "Dear gods... I never stood a chance, did I?"

"Hm?" Hari was shaking people's shoulders and pushing chocolate frogs into their hands. "Oh. Nah."

"I would like to reiterate my thanks you chose the option you did."

"Okay." Hari shook Pansy again. "Come on. They're gone." He ignored the plaintive cries that had begun to dwindle into muted burbles of sorrow.

Tam had pulled out a small knife with heavy leather wrapped around the hilt. She walked over to the trapped dementor and began to prod its limbs, carefully considering the noises it made after each attempt.

A man who looked like he had seen better centuries came running down the corridor and stopped dead. "What the..." He stared open-mouthed.

"We have chocolate," said Tam. She prodded the dementor again and smiled as it made a tortured sound.

"Ah." The man stared some more. Then he ran by, giving the dementor a large berth as he headed towards the front of the train.

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==OUT TAKE==

"Good afternoon, class," Hari was sitting in the chair at the Professor's desk, feet propped up and leaning back. "Today we have a guest instructor." He nodded at the dark-haired man standing in front of the room. His pale features were highlighted by thin scars running across his eyes. Said eyes had little swirling things in them, they looked rather like Hari's right eye.

"Good afternoon," said the man. "My name is Uchiha Itachi. I'm going to go over special techniques for dealing with certain kinds of aggressors. Everyone get up, this is going to be a practical lesson." There was a shiver of fear in the students that Itachi found vaguely unsettling. "Clear the desks." And now the terrified obedience as they hurried to move things out of the way. "Right. Now, everyone enter the basic stance."

After almost a minute of the students looking in pale horror at him, Itachi frowned. One student passed out in the back of the class. "Huh." A moment's pause. "Hari?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the students.

"Yes, dad?"

The collective anxiety became collective anxiety laced with confusion.

"You *did* teach them the basic stance."

"The what?"

Itachi covered his face with his hands and sighed. "Hidan taught it to you. He probably called it 'pussy bitch stance' or something."

"Oh! The limp-dicked loser cunt stance? He said I didn't need that."

"Of course not."

"Besides, the youngest class is, like, eleven. They should know this stuff already."

"Has your time with them given you the impression that melee combat training features heavily in their youth education?"

"Nothing said it didn't."

"I see."

"Me too, thanks dad!"

"Alright. Everyone outside. We're going to have some lessons."

There were more flinches and looks of concern. "Grass is softer than stone. You will be falling down a lot."

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Dumbledore stood at the Head Table and stared off into the distance. Finally he shook himself. "I have the distinctly confusing pleasure of welcoming our most recent guest-instructor to Hogwarts. Professor Uchiha. Today, I understand that only one student is in the hospital wing and Mister Malfoy is there due to an unrelated incident involving a book and Miss Granger attempting to brain her friend with it. I recommend that she take up cricket during the summer and that if she could manage to fly at all, she might consider Chaser on her House Team-Slytherin could use the points.

"Back to my point, though. Professor Uchiha taught some much needed basic training and underlying learning that would probably have come in handy earlier this year. I am genuinely at a loss for words, since I had begun to think that no one associated with Professor Potter's home life was capable of interacting with others sans attempted murder or, at the least, significant bloodshed."

Dumbledore turned to Itachi, who was covering his face with his hands again. Professor Snape had leaned over and had been commiserating while also ascertaining that Uchiha Itachi was in no way related to James Potter. "It is with a great deal of shock that I say: please come back any time."

(A/N John)

Well, I'd been hoping to have this out a few days ago. That didn't happen. Me and Spoon haven't had enough time to write recently. Plus we're working on another project (something I would never normally do, but...)

(A/N 2 John)

As per requests, Itachi has finally arrived. And no, we didn't cave. This was planned for quite some time. Also, once again: remember that I keep about two chapters ahead of what I publish, so people clamoring for something should remember that I've already written the next couple chapters and won't be including that stuff.

(A/N 3 John)

There was some bit of trivia that we threw in recently, but I can't remember what it was, so kudos to those of you who work it out?

(A/N 4 John)

Poor Lupin. This is *not* going to be a good year for him. Spoon pointed out that he has some preconceived notions, but I think it has to do with the fact that he is only occasionally involved with the magical world and so has not kept up with how things have been recently.

(A/N 5 John)

Also, it's Spoon's fault that Sprinkles is focused on Pansy. And that he's named Sprinkles. In fact, pretty much that entire plotline (and yes, it is a plotline) is out of her diseased mind. For once, it really isn't a case of me taking it too far. Mostly. A bit of it is still probably me.

(A/N Spoon 1)

In my defense, Sprinkles is an adorable name and he totally understands what she's going through and is trying to comfort her.

The Confusion and Sorting it Out

Chapter 44: The Confusion and Sorting it Out

... or When Lupin Had Concerns.

Dumbledore stood at Hogsmeade Station with a frown on his face (well, hidden behind his beard). He was not thrilled about having to delay the Opening Feast in order to deal with what was almost certainly Hari Potter's latest escapade. He supposed he had been lucky so far in that so few of the boy's activities had ended up being his problem. That didn't make it any better, though. And there was the pitiful sound coming from the train, too. That wasn't nice at all.

"Remus," he said.

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore?"

"You said that this is a *dementor* making that noise?"

"Yes."

"A dementor that is, in fact, *trapped*?"

"Yes sir."

"It seems that sometimes Severus is right, if only by accident. I feel it is safe to assume this is his fault." Dumbledore walked around the train and along the tracks, stopping when he saw the point of something poking through the metal wall of the train. "I could have sworn that this was enchanted to resist damage." He tapped the metal with his wand. "*Expecto Patronum*." An ethereal phoenix flew out of his wand and into the train through the wall. The sounds became screams of unearthly terror and the point visible began to quiver.

"Was that necessary, Professor?" asked Lupin.

"Strictly speaking: no. But I had to see what would happen." Dumbledore used his wand tip to push the point back into the train and watched as the dementor rushed off into the night, pursued by a patronus. "Well that was fun. Let's go have dinner, hm?"

Lupin was staring at his former Headmaster and current employer with a look of concern.

"Let's go, Remus."

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Remus Lupin's day had become very surreal very quickly. He'd been brought in by Professor Dumbledore because Sirius Black had escaped Azkaban-something he'd been unaware of until Professor Dumbledore had shown up on Lupin's doorstep and made the job offer. He was conflicted about not mentioning the whole animagus thing, but reasoned that it wasn't like Professor Dumbledore didn't already know-the man did tend to know everything in his castle.

He'd spent a pleasant rest of the summer preparing for the school year (and stocking up on enough wine coolers and weed-he'd found that his transformation was easiest tipsy and stoned and that his wolf-side tended to be pretty mellow under those circumstances and usually just, well, wolfed down a big bowl of dog food and went to sleep), but that had not prepared him for the sights of the Platform.

Most of it had been the usual stuff, parents saying goodbye and so on. But then there had been two girls who'd just walked around with trunks floating behind them-and not from the fancy trunk-maker in Diagon who made self-moving trunks. Then there had been the crazy child-creature with the mask who'd run down the length of the platform with several random objects orbiting her and some of them launching themselves at other young people who she seemed to gleefully chase. There had also been the woman who was clearly dangerous; she was an incredibly pretty redhead with a very obvious

diamond ring (not that he'd seen it at first) with the largest handgun he'd ever seen; she also hadn't had it holstered and continually looked like she was about to point it at someone and pull the trigger. There had been the girl who'd shown up with a look he had last seen on Black's face, along with a vile-looking mother and a man who was probably her father, but who looked like he'd seen better days and also times when he might have had all his limbs. And that was to say nothing of spotting the kindly Weasley clan with their youngest, the only girl... who had glowing, red eyes and carried herself like a veteran of a war (although he'd seen her very quietly enchant a young man's shoelaces to tie themselves together at the right time to fall face-first into a passing trunk). Oh, and there had been the rather ugly girl who'd shown up with an escort of the Ministry's Finest and a sack of galleons.

He'd searched for the last remaining link he had to the good times of his youth (well, discounting the traitorous son of a bitch who he was hoping to have a chance to transform on) without success. That had been depressing, but he'd figured the lad might have arrived early and searched the train. No luck there either. He'd finally settled into a fitful doze to pass the train ride. The next thing he remembered was waking up very cold.

It had taken several moments to work out what was going on and then conjure his patronus and go to check the train. What he'd found was a distinctly small sample of dementor activity. In fact, he'd found just the one pinned to the wall and being prodded by the youngest Weasley who'd casually dismissed him with a declaration of chocolate possession.

Having just watched Professor Dumbledore torment a dementor, he was somehow still unprepared for his discovery of a gigantic scroll in the Entrance Hall. It was a letter of dismissal signed by the Board of Governors. There was nothing to indicate that the order had been rescinded, but it was nevertheless in a place of clear prominence. And Dumbledore didn't seem inclined to stop long enough to explain. Life was not making sense anymore.

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Hari listened absently as the Sorting Hat chanted some drivel about something. It involved four dead people and various traits he'd been unsure if they had possessed, given whom he'd seen end up in their houses.

He watched as the formulae on the Hat whirled around as it was placed on each head and idly scribbled them down for later. Now that he was going to have formal training, it would be good to have some things to study in his spare time again.

"Why does everyone clap?" he asked Hermione, who had just enthusiastically applauded a young blonde waif who had sprinted over to the table of the snake and plopped down with the others her age.

"House solidarity?" Daphne shrugged, having decided that the conversation was more interesting than watching her sister poke Ron Weasley until he looked at her and immediately looking away.

"What's that?"

"Forget it."

"Eh." Hari ignored much of the rest of the sorting beyond making some more notes about the Hat and who was sorted where. "Any idea who Sirius Black is?" There was a sharp sound from Sprinkles.

"Why do you ask?" Pansy leaned forwards, her recent scowl softening slightly.

"Who is he?"

"A renowned mass murderer. He exploded a dozen muggles. My parents are big fans of his." Pansy glared at Hermione. "I didn't say I like him. Again: why do you ask?"

"Because he escaped from Azkaban last month." The rest of his friends froze. "Apparently it's a secret. After Lockhart, they don't want to let anyone know someone else escaped." There were some more sounds from the dog beside him on the bench.

"I'll bet," murmured Tracy. "They'd hate to let people know that place is leaking prisoners."

"Oh look, they're done." Hari used a pair of chopsticks to start serving himself food. "No!" He yanked on the leash, jerking the dog back just as its jaws were about to close around a hunk of prime rib. Hari scribbled something on a piece of paper and tossed it into the air. It sailed down the Hall and out the staff entrance.

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Professor Snape looked up from his food and spotted a gigantic black dog sitting on his house's bench. As he stared, kibble appeared in a bowl in front of the dog. He fixed his 'Really, Potter?' face firmly and stalked down to have a word with his student.

Hari watched Sprinkles watch the kibble with a forlorn look. "Eat." The dog shook its head. "You're not having steak. Now eat this." A whine. "Eat or starve. Your choice."

The dog turned its gaze on Pansy, employing a passable attempt at puppy-eyes for a creature the size of a pony. "Not a chance," she said. She had a slight smirk on her face. "I'm a good Pureblood girl; I know how to deny the most pitiful beggars." She rolled her eyes. "Besides, I think Hari has his heart set on you having-

"POTTER!" Everyone but Hari jumped.

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"I'm not going to ask why there is a dog in the Great Hall. I'm not going to ask why this dog is at *my* house's table. I'm not even going to ask why it is sitting on a bench. I *am* going to ask why you had dog kibble sent up from the kitchens!"

"Why?"

"Because if the House Elves stole it from Hagrid, he's going to complain to *me!*"

"Oh." Hari paused. "I don't really care, but that's a fair reason to be upset."

"Thank you. I so desperately needed your validation."

"Any time, Professor. Bad Sprinkles!" Hari yanked on the leash again, just as the dog was attempting to relieve itself on Professor Snape's leg.

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Remus Lupin was watching Professor Snape with idle amusement until he registered the dog on the Slytherin bench. It took several moments for the thoughts to penetrate his head as he considered the fact that Sirius Black was already *in* Hogwarts, where the dementors weren't allowed. He still didn't know where Harry was, although he intended to ask Professor Snape who he'd referred to as 'Potter'. But not spotting Black's target didn't mean that he wasn't a threat. He had just risen, drawing his wand to attack when a boy with dark hair yelled 'Bad Sprinkles' and pulled on Black's leash, sending the released urine shooting upwards in a graceful arc to land in the middle of Lupin's soup.

He was still working on that when the boy pulled a rolled up newspaper-a *Muggle* newspaper-from somewhere and smacked the dog on the nose several times. "Bad Sprinkles! Bad!" Watching

Sirius Black, betrayer and murderer cower as his nostrils were bludgeoned was disturbingly amusing. And since the bastard didn't seem inclined to make trouble, he could give it a bit of time. Besides the kid seemed to be rather good with the paper.

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"Hari!" hissed Hermione.

"Yes?" Hari gave Sprinkles one last thwack on the nose and turned to look at her with his swirling, red eye.

"You shouldn't hit animals."

"Why?"

"It's wrong."

"If you say so." He whacked Sprinkles on the nose again when the dog made a lunge for some chicken.

"Hari!"

"Do you really think getting worked up will help?" asked Blaise.

"No." Hermione looked at her plate. "But it'd be nice if it made a difference."

"It'd be nice if there were world peace," said Tracy. "What's your point?"

There was a squeak as Sprinkles' head was forced into the kibble. "Eat up." There was a snort of laughter from the High Table. A streak of blonde, orange, and red landed on the dog's back and wrapped around it like a humanoid limpet. "DOGGY!"

"Huh. There's a thing." Hari went back to his doodling, using a hand to keep the dog focused on its own food.

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"Good evening," proclaimed Dumbledore as he stood, brushing bits of cake frosting from his beard. He gave the entire hall a brilliant twinkle and continued. "It is my pleasure to once again welcome most of you back to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Some of those who I would like to welcome back graduated and several more who I'd hoped not to welcome back are nevertheless here. Some of you are new to our school and so I bid you a special welcome and ask that you please refrain from asking stupid questions like where anything is. On a similar note, the Express is leaving early this year.

"To those of you who are new, the student body in general, and the Weasley family in particular: I direct your attention to the Forbidden Forest. I know that it is a difficult concept, but we hope that by having the word 'forbidden' in the name, it might be clear enough to people that you are not, in fact, allowed inside. Those who enter will receive no punishment, but we will happily add their names to the discrete plaque in the Entrance Hall dedicated to those who did not return.

"In addition to that, we have a similarly forbidden thing which is the items list. Things on this list are not permitted. Punishment varies depending on the particular item and the use to which the owner was attempting to put it. I have placed a copy of the list on the Head Boy's pillow. Do memorize it because I expect you to make sure your brothers are kept to the lowest tier of items on it.

"I am sure that all of you remember the policy about pregnancies at Hogwarts and I will thank you to keep it in mind when you engage in indiscretions which are often conducted in areas of dubious privacy.

"There are a few new rules this year: for one thing, possession of a student or faculty member is now an officially recognized infraction of the rules for which punishment will be assessed most thoroughly. Possession of certain kinds of dark artifacts will likewise be treated with kid gloves under spiked gauntlets. I include for your edification the fact that being Lord Voldemort is an offense currently punishable by execution. No, I will not explain why.

"Finally, I would like to direct everyone to greet our newest transfer student: Ginerva Tam Riddle Weasley. She has transferred from Gryffindor to Gryffelin. Don't ask. Everyone please give her a wave, she could use some acceptance." There was a death glare being sent his way from the small redhead. "With the formalities out of the way, you should head to sleep so you can be properly late for your classes tomorrow." Students were halfway to the door when Dumbledore spoke again.

"I have been reminded that I should introduce this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor: Remus Lupin. I thank you for your applause," he said to the students, who had continued to shuffle out unlisteningly.

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==OUT TAKE==

"Good afternoon, class," Hari sat on the edge of his desk with a book in his lap. Sitting in his chair was a man in one of the ubiquitous cloaks that everyone associated with Hari seemed to wear. This one was wearing a face mask that had red and orange swirling around and his feet were propped up.

The man leapt in front of the desk. "Sit." He looked at the assembled students with his one, visible eye. "My name is Tobi, but you will call me 'Sir'. I've been brought in to teach some specialized techniques.

Quite a large number of them have to do with pragmatic use of materials at hand."

He hopped onto the desk beside Hari. "I understand that many of you have been given some basic instruction in various disciplines by my colleagues. Deidara went boom, yes?" At the terrified nods, he had a posture that implied grinning. "Well, it's important that we expand on your learning."

The man picked up an ice cream scoop, an air-horn, some boxed spaghetti, a blue matchbox car, a push-up bra, a can of Mountain Dew, and a fuzzy brown teddy bear. On the desk behind him, Hari placed a bound and gagged man with a damp patch at his crotch. "For example, we will begin with how to perform field surgery on a chest wound with some everyday objects."

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Girl-Tobi and her cadre had to wait for the previous class to leave the Defense classroom. The boys and girls were completely soaked in gore and had expressions of shell-shocked horror. When they got inside, they found that the classroom was similarly decorated with the addition of assorted bits. Hari was somehow pristine standing next to a man who must have been bathing in blood.

"Hari?" asked Girl-Tobi.

"Yes, Girl-Tobi?"

"Is it okay if *he* kills people?"

"Yes."

"Okay!"

The man's one eye had turned a blood-red and was fixed on Girl-Tobi.

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Dumbledore was visibly shaking. His eyes were little chips of ice.
"What happened?" he snarled.

The man cocked his head. "She didn't call me 'sir'," he replied in his cheerful tone. "So I had to choke a bitch."

(A/N John)

Let's get this out of the way: no, this does not mean they're canon.

(A/N 2 John)

And despite what Spoon thinks, Tobi didn't warp spacetime to get there.

(A/N 3 John)

Now that we've got that done. This is one of those chapters that I didn't expect to be so long, but things spiraled a bit and got longer.

(A/N 4 John)

I'm genuinely not sure how long Third Year will be. We don't have much planned, but that doesn't mean much. It will be a few more chapters before the next of the major plot points, I expect. But there are so few this year compared to things that happen...

(A/N 4 John)

This was a fun chapter to write, though. Especially the outtake, which I had planned since we began guest instructor outtakes.

Also, it was Spoon's idea to have Sirius pee on Snape. I decided to have it land in Lupin's soup because reasons.

(A/N 5 John)

Also, a challenge: what do you think is the correct usage of those materials Tobi gathered for emergency field surgery?

The Best Laid Lesson Plans

Chapter 45: The Best Laid Lesson Plans of Werewolves and Men

Blaise had tried to go to sleep, but the dire warnings of what was to come from Hermione and Daphne had pretty much put a damper on his ability to relax. It was, therefore, with only a little shock that he found that Hari had somehow ended up sitting on the edge of his bed without appearing to enter the room.

"Good morning, Blaise!"

"It's not morning."

"Of course it is! Twelve-oh-one."

Blaise glared. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"Tam wasn't."

"What's that mean?"

"Nothing."

Blaise yelped as he was dragged from his bed and down a flight of stairs to the Common Room.

The girl who had been Ginny Weasley was sitting there, a pebble in her hand and an expression of frustration on her face.

"I'm not surprised that you were able to get into the girl's wing," she said. "Really, I'm not. But this is frustrating. It feels like I haven't practiced wandless magic in... fifty... years... son of a bitch."

"I always thought it was like walking on water," said Hari. "Once you learn it, you never forget."

Tam stared at him as Blaise was shoved into a sitting position and given a pebble of his own. "Come again?"

"I think around here they talk about riding bicycles or something." Hari tossed a bone-shaped cookie to Sprinkles, whom he still had on a leash. The dog had been so busy staring at the attempts to learn wandless magic that the cookie smacked into his head, drawing a yelp.

The pebble began to wobble in Tam's hand. "Not bad." Hari sat down beside the two. "I know that neither of you are the types to relax much."

"Actually..." began Blaise.

"But it might be somewhat useful if we tried a little specialized meditation. I came across the technique over the summer while I was... abroad." Waterfall had some interesting scrolls lying around next to the Hero Water. "We start with a deep breath and focusing on our chak-our magic. It should be like a vast ocean."

"I think I've heard of this," murmured Blaise as he exhaled. "But I thought it was supposed to be a stream?"

"I found an ocean," replied Hari. "Isn't that normal?"

Blaise looked at Tam, who seemed unmoved. "Uh..."

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"You seem very mellow," said Hermione.

"It wasn't too bad," Blaise buttered some toast. "We spent a lot of time meditating. I must have a lump the size of my head though. Every time I dropped off, he hit me with a newspaper."

"And that made a lump?"

"I think he put a pipe in it."

"That sounds like Hari," muttered Pansy. "He's also the only one who can get away with this." She pointed at the huge dog who had taken the spot on the bench beside her and was alternating between eating the kibble in its bowl and staring at her with huge, round eyes that were clearly begging for bangers.

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"Good morning, I'm sure all of you slept well knowing that some of the most feared creatures in the magical world are just outside the boundaries of the grounds and that they eagerly hunger for the chance to eat our souls."

"My Uncle Pein does that," murmured Hari. The others stared at him in horror.

"If, by some freak chance, you *did* sleep well, I expect that it will change once your Professors begin giving homework. I understand that several of them, and I am thinking here of Professor Snape, have been thinking of new and devious ways to word homework such that you will have to spend more time in the library and less time, and I quote, 'coming up with dunderheaded ways to make trouble'.

"Those of you who are just beginning your term with us should once again be reminded that under no circumstances should you ask for help from your peers. They are under express orders to mislead you at all turns in keeping with Hogwarts tradition. Which reminds me that I should award Mister George Weasley of Gryffindor two hundred points for having the most inventive lie told last year which resulted in the first year in question-Mister Creevy-becoming so lost that we had to send out search parties. Well done!"

"Your schedules were placed on your pillows five minutes ago. Classes began twenty minutes before that. I am most disappointed in my staff for lingering around over their meals instead of teaching you." Snape glanced at McGonagall and Flitwick. All three shook their heads and went back to their food. "Anyone still here in fifteen seconds will be docked points for cutting class." Professor Sprout covered her face as the horde rushed from the Hall en masse, the screams of the slow-moving echoing horribly.

"Really, Albus," hissed Poppy as she drew her wand to minister to the fallen. "Was that necessary?"

"I always want to be sure that they understand the importance of maintaining schedules."

"Think of it this way," said Snape as he served himself some more toast and poured coffee into a special mug that had been enchanted not to dissolve. "No one died this time." He took a sip, apparently unaware of the greasy plumes of black smoke that poured out of his ears.

"New formula?" asked Flitwick, mildly.

"No," said Sprout as she watched her Hufflepuffs slowly help each other to their feet and check each other over. "Just new beans I grew for him. With some potions he added to their soil."

"It's perfect." The others went suddenly pokerfaced as oily smog wafted towards the ceiling. "What?"

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"Good morning, class," said Professor Lupin. Things since dinner the night before had not made him any more comfortable with reality. Apparently the world was coming apart at the seams. He'd tried to ask after his friend's son and was mostly ignored. Snape had

actually laughed outright, which was not reassuring. He'd been unable to find the boy himself, despite looking. No one resembled James Potter and he knew the lad should look like a miniature version of his father.

At least he'd been looking forwards to teaching. He'd always wanted to try it. For some reason, Snape hadn't been bitter about that either. There were muttered imprecations of no one being able to take Potions off his hands and he'd be damned if he did two courses at once.

Then, this morning, Dumbledore had instigated a riot of sorts and seen to it that several students were badly injured without apparent concern. Lupin was beginning to suspect that his former Headmaster (and current employer) was suffering from some kind of dementia or senility. The man seemed completely lucid, though... he'd have to ask Madam Pomfrey.

But now... there was something wrong here. He'd just greeted his class of Second Year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws and they had all frozen in terror. He wasn't sure if he wouldn't have received a friendlier response if he'd just come out and said he was a werewolf.

"We're going to start our year with a practical lesson." And now one of his students had begun to cry. What was going on here? "For this, we'll need to leave the classroom." Did that boy just wet himself? The class rose and followed him with an air that would have been better suited to the march of the condemned towards the guillotine.

X

X

Lupin nodded politely to Professor Snape, who was reading from a potions journal in the teacher's lounge.

"Is this why you insisted I not get rid of the boggart?"

"Well... yes. I was hoping to have a short lesson on them."

"I... see. Well, I suppose it was good fortune you had a hitchhiker then. They don't seem to spend much time in Hogwarts these days."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Anyways, don't mind me. I'm just going to read."

"Alright. So, class, who can tell me what a boggart is?" Lupin pointed to a Ravenclaw who had raised a trembling hand. "Yes, Miss... Higgens?"

"It's a fear-monster, Professor Lupin. It shapes itself to our fears to try and scare us away."

"Not bad. Anyone else? How about you, Mister... Graves?"

"Um... they feed... er,... I don't know, Professor Lupin." The boy flinched.

"Dear, dear," said Snape from behind his magazine. "I thought I drilled it into you that a bunch of dunderheads need to read their textbooks." To the surprise of Professor Lupin, the boy didn't seem afraid of Snape. The last time Lupin had been able to get much information about what was going on at Hogwarts, which had been five years ago, admittedly, Professor Snape was the terror of the castle.

"Last year we were taught that reading the textbook is for pussies, Professor Snape," said a young Hufflepuff.

"I suspect that only applies to non-dunderheads, Miss Wieks. In the future, do the rest of us a favor and read the book until you are able to see competence with a telescope." Snape turned a page and drew a ballpoint pen, circling something and grumbling about idiots being allowed to publish.

"Well then..." said Lupin weakly-what was going on here? "Does anyone know how a witch or wizard fights a boggart?"

"Cut off its head?"

"Burn it alive? And dead?"

"Sacrifice a weaker classmate?"

"The Four Ds?"

Despite his growing concern, Lupin had to ask. "Do you mean the Three Ds?"

"No, Professor Lupin."

"What are the Four Ds?"

"Disembowel, dismember, decapitate, destroy."

"Oh." Lupin looked at Snape, who seemed unperturbed by this. "No. There is a simple incantation we use. By casting it, we force the boggart to turn from something terrifying into something funny. Laughter drives away a boggart."

"Does it kill it?" asked Wieks.

"No!"

"Then we should probably stick with the Four Ds."

"What in the name of... no. No. The spell is *ridikulous* ."

"It sounds like it, anyway," murmured Snape. Lupin was horrified to see a few students nod.

"No! Everyone take out your wands and try casting the spell." Lupin tried not to pay much attention to the fact that Snape was probably smirking. It was also a bit unnerving how quickly the class formed up

into lines and began to practice the spell over and over and even more unnerving how quickly they picked up the proper casting.

"See?" said Snape. "Now that you dunderheads are applying yourselves..." He turned another page. "Speaking of dunderheads... who let this idiot near a junior chemistry set?"

"I'm going to open the door now. Everyone have your wands ready." Lupin opened the door to the wardrobe.

A figure in a red and black cloak stepped out, single red eye gleaming. "Good morning, class." Every student dropped his or her wand. The pale boy gave a huge grin. "Today, we have a guest instructor." A shadowy, half-formed shape in an identical cloak began to emerge and the entire class screamed in terror, but remained frozen in place. Lupin was too shocked to act.

"Oh for heaven's sake..." Snape pointed his wand over the top of his magazine. "*Ridikulous* ." The figure turned into Draco Malfoy cowering in a fetal ball while a stylized Hermione Granger menaced him with a copy of the collected works of Shakespeare. As the huddled blonde babbled for mercy, the class began to laugh with relief and the boggart fled back inside its wardrobe.

"Class dismissed," said Lupin and watched the students collect their wands and shuffle out. He glared at Snape. "What the hell was that about?"

"I do believe that their last Defense teacher made an impression."

"What?"

"That was him. It's unusual for a boggart faced with a group to find a shared fear."

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"Why didn't you warn me?" snarled Lupin. He was sitting next to Snape at the Head Table and was not happy about it, but he wanted a word with the man.

"Warn you about...?"

"That the boy with Siri-the huge dog is also the one who taught Defense last year?"

"He named it Sprinkles."

"Why would he call a class 'Sprinkles'?"

"The dog, idiot."

"Oh!" Lupin looked over at the dog, which was chewing desperately at its leash while the boy holding the other end ignored it. A small smile made its way onto Lupin's face.

"How did you find out, anyway?"

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"Alright, class, what is the most dangerous magical creature you know of?" Lupin asked. He'd decided to stop greeting his classes with 'good morning' or 'good afternoon' after both Second Year classes and his first group of Third Years all flinched.

"Hari Potter," replied the entire class. Except for one boy who said "My dad".

"Um..." Lupin had been prepared for a lot of answers, up to and including puffsskins-which weren't dangerous at all, but that wouldn't stop at least one joker from saying it (here he was thinking of James Potter)-but he had no idea whom they were talking about. "What?"

The entire class (sans the one boy) pointed at the boy who, Lupin noticed, was still holding the leash attached to Sirius Black. "Potter... Potter..." Lupin shook his head. It couldn't be. The boy looked nothing like James. And that red eye... he hadn't seen Lily Potter in almost twelve years, but he was pretty sure that wasn't her eye-color. Besides... "Do you have magical pink eye?" he gasped.

" Yes."

" No, he doesn't," said an olive-skinned boy who Lupin was pretty sure was named Zabini. "He just likes saying that instead of the truth-which, to be fair, he hasn't told anyone."

" Oh." Lupin forced himself to calm down. It wasn't an outbreak of a dangerous condition, just the possibility that his memory was horribly damaged or that something had happened to the son of his best friend. "Um... we have to go to the Teacher's Lounge for our lesson." That seemed to evoke less anxiety than telling them it was a practical lesson.

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The wardrobe shook violently for a moment and then went still. Lupin glared at Snape, who had set aside his magazine to watch the display. "Who can tell me what a boggart is?" He listened to the frizzy-haired witch's recital of everything he'd ever heard about boggarts and even a few guesses about their abilities to actually inflict harm that he'd never considered. "Yes, yes. Can anyone guess what's in the wardrobe?"

" A boggart?" asked the haughty one with black hair who had the same smooth nose he remembered on the man who went on to become Lord Greengrass.

" Yes." Lupin tried to teach the class the spell to fight a boggart, but kept getting distracted by the fact that the wardrobe wasn't moving.

Eventually, he couldn't stand it anymore and opened the door before poking his head inside. "Huh. So that's what a boggart looks like," came his voice from the depths.

When he emerged, Snape had left, but the rest of the class was watching in confusion. "Does anyone want to see what a boggart looks like?" He was forced to give the rest of the lesson without any practical demonstration, since the boggart refused to emerge.

As the students were leaving, he overheard the frizzy one speak to the boy with the red eye. "I'll give you this," she said. "When you taught Defense, things were more... active."

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"It came up."

"I see. Well, I thought it would be more fun to let you find out that James Potter's son was teaching last year on your own."

"WHAT?"

X

X

-Omake-

"Pein?" said Sasori as he sat down at the small table that the leader of the Akatsuki used as a place to do a bit of paperwork, since his desk was still colonized by the sootfinch. "I have compiled a report and I think I can explain who is behind our recent incidents."

"Orochimaru."

"It's Orochimar-how the hell did you know that?"

"You *did* say that only two people knew those were your agents."

"Well yes."

"And I took the wild leap to assume that the other person was Orochimaru."

"True. But we've been having other problems recently. Supplies going missing, Kakuzu's bounties being killed and claimed, that sort of thing."

"And all traceable to Orochimaru."

"Yes. But how did you know?"

"Because the odds of multiple sources working independently to make things difficult for us just isn't that great?"

"Granted. But it still warranted investigation."

"Which is why I held off on retribution towards Sound until you confirmed things."

"That's actually a really smart idea. I'll bet you don't know *why* Orochimaru is-

"My nephew."

"Technically." Sasori paused. "Actually, it would be fair to say that it was Hari and Tobi."

Pein swiped a hand down his face. "*How?*"

"Well, Hari kidnapped Orochimaru's protégé, wrecked a chunk of the base, and made off with some valuable research."

"All things I'm aware of. Why Tobi?"

"Well, there was that delegation from Sound and..."

"Oh gods"

"There was a witness who reported what happened to Orochimaru."

"You have information on that one?" Pein looked down at the picture of the pale, white-haired boy with no eyebrows and an affectation of nobility. "Tobi!"

"Yes, Pein?" Tobi was sitting on the windowsill.

"Do you recall that group from Sound a while back?"

"Tobi isn't sure..."

"You leaned out the window and turned my courtyard into glass."

"Oh! Tobi remembers them. They went boom!" Tobi snickered.

Pein held up a picture of Kaguya Kimimaro. "You missed a spot."

The laughter stopped. "I won't miss again."

"No." Pein rose. "I'll deal with this one myself. Someone send me Itachi. It's time we take a vacation."

"Tobi didn't know the pair of you swung that way," chirped Tobi. "Eep!" The last part came as he found that the Heavenly Gaze of the Omnipresent god flung him out the window without warning.

Itachi entered the office. "You called for me, Leader-Sama?"

"Indeed. We're going on a field trip to Sound."

"Um..."

"We're not going there to see your brother."

"Oh good."

"We will be avoiding him, in fact. Well, sort of. I think he's currently in... Hot Water if Sasori's reports are accurate."

"Konoha put him on active duty already?"

"What?"

"He's back in Konoha."

"Was."

"What?"

"Very briefly, in fact. I think he left after a week or so."

Itachi blinked. "He... godsdamnit!"

"Went back to Sound? Yes."

"Then why is he in Hot Water?"

"If I had to guess? Because Kakuzu has a bounty he'd like to bring in who is there."

"Why is my brother helping Kakuzu collect bounties?"

"He isn't."

"Huh?"

"He's killing those bounties to annoy us."

"Oh."

"And as training," Pein added as an afterthought.

"Aren't Kakuzu's targets A and S rank?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Indeed. And we're going to have a word with Orochimaru."

"About my brother."

"No!" Pein sighed. "But on our way, we will be discussing another relative of yours."

"They're dead, aren't they?"

"Your son."

"Oh. But he's not related to me."

Pein snarled wordlessly and stomped out of the room. "Itachi!"

The Uchiha trotted out after his seething leader.

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Sasori was neatly collecting his papers when, from outside he heard:
"HEY! WHAT DID HE MEAN BY 'ACTUALLY'?"

(A/N John)

And so begin a few chapters in which things must happen but are not necessarily all that funny. Crack will increase shortly as we work through the otherwise dull parts of the year.

(A/N 2 John)

The Omake was a lot of fun to write, though.

(A/N 3 John)

So was the scene with Lupin teaching. Poor man.

(A/N 4 John)

I've noticed that Hari seems to be bad for the sanity of Defense Professors.

(A/N 5 John)

We now see the beginnings of Hari's effect on the world of Elemental Nations when not present. Well, more than before.

The Only Thing We Have to Fear

Chapter 46: The Only Thing We Have to Fear

... is Children Who Face Fear

Lupin's week didn't improve as he tried teaching successively older years. There was that paranoid part of him that suspected someone had arranged his lessons in age order just to give him a dawning sense of horror. The Fourth and Fifth Years had been exceptionally aggressive towards the boggart, half of them forgetting to use the charm for boggart fighting and instead resorting to reductor curses and banishing furniture at the poor thing. He'd been having trouble convincing it to exit the wardrobe for his classes and had begun resorting to bribes of food just to get it outside for the class. And that was *after* he'd switched to trying to teach the *Ridikulus* charm *before* going down to the lounge in order to prevent anyone from reacting badly (a policy he adopted after the Hufflepuff and Slytherin Fourth Years had begun blasting when the wardrobe rattled).

It didn't help that Snape was somehow making time away from Potions in order to observe. If he'd overheard Dumbledore correctly, the notorious Dungeon Bat had actually canceled several classes so that he could watch the interactions with the boggart. The worst part was not being able to fault the man for finding amusement at the antics of his classes. Not because it was funny, it was actually pretty horrifying (and he suspected that only a boggart's natural resistance to harm from anything other than laughter had saved it from being destroyed), but because the man had a good reason to laugh at Lupin's pain... and the man was a former Death Eater and so probably had a certain kind of sense of humor that leant itself to a... darkly physical sense of humor. Then he'd had his Sixth Year class.

He'd been looking forwards to the NEWT classes on the grounds that it meant there were only two left and then he would be ready for everything that was going to happen for the rest of the year. He had

begun to worry that Dumbledore (or worse, McGonagall) would comment on the fact that he had begun to drink whiskey with his dinner. After his Sixth Years, he stopped worrying. He also switched to firewhiskey.

The class had listened to his instruction on the new spell ferociously and then proceeded to practice with a feverish intensity. When the now-familiar form of Professor Potter stepped out of the wardrobe (with a slightly terrified look on his face), the group had paused for just a second and then there had been a clear group-thought that it wasn't *really* Harry Potter and the group had begun to fire the *Ridikulus* charm in volleys. The boggart had begun to rapidly transform as a variety of shapes were forced upon it in rapid succession. It didn't have the time to finish being a lapdancing Severus Snape before it was a McGonagall with clown makeup, Madam Pomfrey in a Hellooooooo Nurse outfit, Professor Sprout doing something he never wanted to see with a knot on a tree, Hagrid beating a kitten to death with a cricket bat, Gilderoy Lockhart in a gimp outfit, Professor Dumbledore, Cornelius Fudge doing a hat dance with a tricorn hat and a white wig, a toy poodle chasing a cat with odd shapes around its eyes, a robot/car thing shouting that it was stupid and urinating on itself, a group of tiny, blue creatures with white hats who kept changing words to 'borp', and similarly confusing things that began to bleed together until it managed to shamble into the wardrobe and slam the door shut again. Professor Snape had clearly been torn between abject fury at the first image and laughing uproariously at the chaos being inflicted on Lupin's class. And then Seventh Year...

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He'd made the mistake of waiting until they were in the Teacher's Lounge again, on the grounds that Seventh Years wouldn't panic. "Alright class, who can tell me what a bog—" that was as far as Lupin got before the wardrobe rattled once and the entire class began to fling spells at it. Mostly it was bombardment curses, but a fair

number had conjured iron blades and shot and banished them at the wardrobe. And some of them had even conjured *silver dust* and tossed it into the mess, sending Lupin's inner self into a frenzied panic that he had only just managed to keep under control.

Then, suddenly, the violence had stopped and one of the girls spoke. "Sarah, you're the best at detection, move in and check for survivors. Dirkwood, Killpatrick, cover her. The rest of you, be ready to level that spot if something goes wrong."

Lupin had watched in horror as the girl cast a dozen obscure protection charms on herself and then approached the wreckage with caution.

"Dirkwood, Killpatrick? Either of you any good at Fiendfyre?"

Dirkwood shook his head. Killpatrick grinned. "I had a chance to practice over the summer."

"How good?"

"I can get almost fifteen seconds."

"Right. Use that."

Moments later, as the girl called Sarah cast a spell to find unlife, a piece of the ruin shifted slightly and the whole area turned into a tiny pocket of hell. The bombardment hexes and conjurations vanished in the all-consuming flames of Fiendfyre as a chimera of purple-white fire devoured the space.

Lupin's mouth hung open and stayed that way until he heard clapping from off to the side. His head snapped around to see Snape with a smile on his face. "Professor Potter would no doubt have been pleased with your control, Killpatrick. Fifteen points on his behalf." After more than a year of Ronald Weasley on Purging Droughts and his merciless training of Longbottom, he was used to giving points to Gryffindors, even if he hated doing it.

"Think that ends the lesson, Lupin?" he asked.

"Uh... yeah. Class dismissed. Give me two feet on the ways to combat fear magic." The class shuffled out, grumbling about how the target hadn't been as much work as a bound and gagged captive.

X

X

"Hari?"

"Hey, Hermione." Hari was sitting at the front desk in the Runes classroom, a stack of books beside him and a blank sketchpad in his hands. "You look concerned."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm taking Runes?"

"But you're taking Arithmancy!"

"Yes?"

"They're at the same time!"

"Still not following your problem."

"So how come you wer-are in Arithmancy right now?"

Hari stared at her. When she didn't say anything, he felt compelled to offer something. "Yes?" he prompted.

"How?"

"Trade secret."

"That's not an answer!"

"It is, actually. Oh look, Professor Babbling is here. We'll discuss this later."

"You had better believe it."

X

X

Runes and Arithmancy were interesting classes that Hari felt certain he was enjoying more after the first class now that he could see both rooms at once. Even if he was forced to be present in both at the same time in order to ask questions, he wasn't having the problems he had the first day where he realized that the two classes were very much partnered and that someone had been incredibly short-sighted in setting up the entry-level classes in the same time-slot.

It turned out that instruction made the whole thing a lot easier, too. He'd begun taking out his old sealing texts during Herbology and sitting on the lawn with a stack of semi-purloined arithmancy and runes texts from the library (he didn't technically take them out, but he did return them) and began to work on how sealing was supposed to function.

After an afternoon or two, though, he found that wasn't really a good option and instead appropriated an unused room in the dungeons. And made use of shadow clones. Lots of shadow clones. This was because he had begun to experiment and had quickly discovered that doing so was unhealthy if he did so in person. Clones didn't have that concern and so he was able to just keep trying things until they worked.

Over the course of a week, he had managed to take over almost every spare room in the dungeons, which in turn meant that he could have several dozen experimental designs going at once, from the simple to the complex. Unfortunately, shadow clones weren't quite able to reason in the same way as a normal person, or he could

have just had them do the studying for him, but they were still able to test things and that was good enough.

His friends were getting used to once again finding him pretty much camped out in the library at all hours, making notes in a series of apparently different notebooks that nevertheless lacked any distinguishing features. Also, everything was written in some kind of absurd shorthand that had made Tam's head hurt when she looked at it.

He was spending a great deal of time with Tam these days, too, because she was fascinated by the various things he kept muttering when it came to runes and arithmancy. He had picked her brain thoroughly about her advanced and obscure knowledge and she had been gleaning bits and pieces of what he had been doing, although she hadn't the slightest idea how or when he was doing it, since he never seemed to be out of her sight.

X

X

"Potter?"

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"Do you recall what I asked of you over the summer?"

"To put the potions dealer back?"

"Yes. But I was thinking of a request I passed along from Professor Sprout."

"Oh yeah."

"Indeed. She reminded me at breakfast in no uncertain terms. So please stop spending time in the Library for an afternoon and address the problem before I have to hear about it again."

"Alright, Professor."

X

X

"Who can tell me the most remarkable thing about the effect of hippogriff dung on most species of plant used for potions that work on the mind?" Professor Sprout was trying to get her class of First Years to pay attention to the basic lessons that might prevent them from accidentally poisoning themselves later in their time in school. "You there. The Ravenclaw who's picking his nose instead of listening."

"What?"

"Perhaps you'd care to tell me what is so interesting?"

By way of answering, the boy pointed out the greenhouse wall. Professor Sprout was able to just make out a boy in a black cloak chasing what appeared to be a tree that was rustling in terror and fleeing on two legs instead of a collection of roots. The boy was waving what she was fairly certain was Hagrid's ax-and she suspected this because the half-giant in question was chasing after the boy and shouting something that sounded like 'thasmyax' and then a bunch of words she hoped her students weren't able to understand-and towing a huge, black dog along with his other hand, digging furrows in the grounds.

It took her a moment or two to realized that the tree was weaving its way towards Greenhouse One, where she was currently holding her class. As it approached, she could hear it babbling.

"Pleasenotchopmedown! I'llneverdoitagain! HelpProfessorSprout! Helpme!" And similar things.

The boy seemed to be enjoying this, to judge from his smile. He also seemed to be playing with the tree, given that every now and again, he would somehow catch up for a moment, give the tree a glancing

chop, and then fall behind again with theatrical displays of being winded while never being caught up by Hagrid.

"What's that, Professor?" asked the boy.

"That's just Professor Potter. He sometimes teaches Defense. Don't mind him."

"I know Professor Potter!" squeaked a Slytherin. "He killed my older brother!"

"I'm sorry about that, dear."

"He was stupid is what daddy says. It's better that I'm the heir."

"Oh." Sprout cleared her throat. "As I was saying earlier." She raised her voice to be heard over the greenish screams and the sounds of metal hitting wood repeatedly just outside the door.

She risked a glance outside as the sounds died down and saw Hari tucking the severed limbs of the tree into his cloak and dragging away the sap-leaking torso/trunk that looked like it was sobbing pitifully by its leaf-hair. She sighed and closed her eyes before returning to her teaching. And that was why she was completely unprepared for the voice behind her.

"It's taken care of, Professor Sprout."

When her heart had settled a little and her students had caught their breath after screaming, she turned. "Thank you," she said dryly.

"I replanted it. It'll grow back. Probably. I think it will, anyway. And he knows now not to start fights with other plants."

"I hope in general."

"Probably. But I told it if it annoyed you again, I'd use fire. So I think he'll listen next time."

"You threatened a tree, Professor Potter?" asked one of the First Years.

"Well, it was able to beg for mercy, so I figured it could understand threats." The kid nodded in understanding (and mute terror at the smile on Hari's face). "Is there anything else I can do for you, Professor?"

"Leave."

"Alright. I have a new runic array to try out."

"You're testing arrays in your second wee-where'd he go?"

X

X

-Omake-

"Itacih." Pein was strolling along with the man who was probably the sanest member of his organization (well, Madara's organization, but that was a detail). "We need to talk about your son."

"Alright, Leader-Sama. I got a letter from him."

"So he's becoming a... you got a letter?" Pein's voice was slightly wary because Itachi was grinning a bit.

"Yep. He says he had his first job."

"Huh. That was quick."

"He mentioned something about a friend's mother passing his name along or something. Anyway, he was putting down some rebel compound in... a place. 'The Republic of the Congo' doesn't mean much to me. You?"

"Nope. Which doesn't surprise me; it's not like we know much about the place he goes to school."

"Well it took him a few hours."

"Freaking bandits. Or maybe genin, right?"

"Probably bandits. I don't think they have shinobi there. He wiped the place out."

"Good, good. Was he paid?"

"Yeah. It was... £100,000. But he says that it'll go up now that people know he can get the job done."

"Okay. Now what is that in real money?"

Itachi pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and skimmed it. "I remember him listing a conversion rate in here some... ah. Oh."

"What's that mean?"

"It means 'oh', Leader-Sama."

"Itachi..."

"I think it's several million Ryo. At least. He's not sure because he's not up to date on gold prices here and he had to convert it to gold to have a common exchange rate."

"And it's going to go *up* ?"

"That's what he said."

"For hunting more dangerous foes, right?"

"Uh..." Itachi reread the letter. "Nope. Just because his reputation will command a better price."

"Good gods..." Pein blinked. "I had been in the middle of saying something before."

Itachi walked beside Pein in silence.

"We need to talk about your son."

"That's what we were just doing, Leader-Sama."

"NOT WHAT I MEANT!"

"Well, if you would care to explain..." Itachi finished his statement with an offended sniff.

Pein twitched. "Your son is, under no circumstances, *allowed out of the Tower without an escort!*"

"You had already said that, Leader-Sama."

"I want to make sure this is clear," Pein said. "You see, we are now having to remind Orochimaru that he should not be fucking with us because of your son. And I'm expecting Leaf to attack any day now."

"That seems a little excessive, Leader-Sama."

"Don't annoy me, Itachi, or I'll shackle him to my wrist so I know where he is."

"That sounds like a most prudent plan, Leader-Sama."

Pein looked up at the guards on the wall that had begun to move towards them. He waved a hand, exploding the gates and walking inside casually as Itachi's body was enveloped in purple-green fire that became a man in armor and possessing four arms.

Pein's hand extended and Universal Attraction dragged a fleeing peon into his grip. "Please inform Orochimaru that Pein and Uchiha Itachi are here to discuss matters with him."

(A/N John)

The chapter's title comes from the fact that the fear-critters in Harry Potter are boggarts, not dementors. Despite what Lupin tells Harry, dementors are sad-monsters and what Harry fears is loneliness or sadness or hearing his mother dying over and over which just so happens to be embodied in a dementor. So yeah. Seventh Years deal with fear the way Hari trained them: kill it before the fear starts.

(A/N 2 John)

As one might expect, this chapter was rather amusing to write. I enjoy Snape's responses and my ways of thinking of him are rapidly becoming one of those characters I enjoy writing. In the books, he's a sour, embittered man who lives in the past (unlike everyone else?) and takes out his hatred of a dead man on the man's son. But I found that I like emphasizing his dry aspects and Hari has a reality-warping effect. So yeah.

(A/N 3 John)

Wow... I'm writing way longer author's notes than usual. No idea why.

(A/N 4 John)

There is a chapter or so of not-quite-filler coming. It was stuff that needed to happen, but wasn't necessarily all that funny or interesting. Besides, it would have been bad to skip all the way to around the middle of the year.

(A/N 5 John)

I'm also finding that Third Year is turning out more interesting than I'd expected. You can thank Spoon for putting that into my head. And despite the hilarious image one reviewer had of me sitting with a piece of silverware beside me, laughing with

lightning in the background, Spoon is not, in fact, used for eating soup or ice cream. I'm many things, but hallucinating or schizophrenic are not on that list.

An Interlude of Plot Sorry

Chapter 47: An Interlude of Plot. Sorry.

"Potter."

"Yes, Professor Snape?" Hari hadn't looked up from his unending quest to prevent Sprinkles eating unhealthy things. In this case, Daphne had received some chocolate from home and Sprinkles was getting whacked on the nose with a copy of *The London Times* each time he tried to steal a bit.

"I need to meet with you in the Headmaster's office after dinner." Snape would be damned if this were discussed in front of the rest of the school.

"Does this have to do with the fact that Professor Lupin-"

"Not in the slightest."

"Oh. I don't think I've done anything against the rules."

"I doubt that."

"What was that about?" Pansy asked as Professor Snape made his way back to the Head Table, she'd been reading a letter from home, which had resulting in Sprinkles spending a bit of his time licking her hand to cheer her up. It wasn't working.

"I got nothing."

"Don't even try to tell us you haven't been breaking rules right and left," grumbled Blaise, who had been finding himself short on sleep because of Hari.

"Alright."

"Well?" Blaise fairly snarled.

"I wasn't going to even try."

Hermione patted Blaise on the shoulder. "Hari..."

"I don't know why he wants to talk to me."

X

X

It wasn't until that afternoon that Hari finally realized what had been bothering him about the library this year. It was telling that he'd not been in the place all last year, so he had no Sharingan memories of it. There were sections that he hadn't been able to see before. Sections labeled 'Runes' and "Arithmancy". He'd missed them because he'd continued his practice of not using the Byakugan in the library in case of reading something unhealthy to have in his head.

"Excuse me?" he stopped a pretty girl with features that reminded him of home. "Do you have any idea where that section came from?"

"The Runes section?"

"Yes."

"You just started taking Runes, right?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"The sections are set up to prevent people from accessing them when they aren't taking the classes."

"Oh." Hari wished he could use his Byakugan in this room, because he'd love to see the schema that allowed that feature.

"Is there anything else, Professor Potter?"

"No. Thanks."

She gave him a polite smile and a quarter-bow and hurried off towards a Hufflepuff.

Hari walked into the section and began to grab books off the shelves. His eye whirled crazily as he read page after page. After a moment, he just grabbed a pile of books and went off to where he could safely summon Shadow Clones to read the books. Since he planned to review them later, that didn't matter, and he didn't want to find out the hard way that a rune scheme was active.

X

X

"Nice of you to join us, Mister Potter," said Professor McGonagall drily.

"I had a few things I wanted to know about conjuration."

"Why? You seem adept enough at it already," she muttered.

"Well, I wanted to ask a question about Turwill's First Maxim."

Professor McGonagall eyed him for a moment. Then she looked at the class. "Not during class. While *you* might be reading those books, I don't intend to derail the rest of your peers so that I can answer what I have no doubt will be an illegal question."

The room shook and a pane of glass fell out of the window. Despite the jarring movement, Professor McGonagall maintained her balance and she was unsurprised to see Hari Potter still sitting with his feet propped up. The rest of the class was in various states of disarray on the floor... including the large, black dog she hadn't gotten around to telling him to stop dragging around (mostly because she didn't feel like having a pointless not-argument).

"What in the blasted hells was that?" she growled.

"No idea." Hari was internally reeling slightly as he had the memory of a Shadow Clone that had read something distinctly unhealthy. His other clones were already cleaning the mess and checking for damage, but his head was ringing a bit.

Moments later, there was a resounding crash and a blast of heat from the third floor.

"I see my students practiced Fiendfyre over the summer," commented Hari. He watched the Transfiguration professor cover her face with her hands.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?" The frizzy-haired girl was patting herself to check that nothing had been loosened.

"Do you know what kind of magical creature looks like a monkey with a head full of water?"

"Um... Kappa, I think."

"Dangerous?"

"No, not really."

"What about when it's a paste that's been burned with hellfire?"

"I highly doubt it."

"Oh. Good."

"Do I want to know?"

"Defense with the Seventh Years."

"Oh."

The pair watched as Professor McGonagall stalked out of the room. Several minutes later, she could be heard shouting: "YOUR LESSONS ARE *OUTSIDE* FROM NOW ON!" When she returned, she was smoldering slightly and also shaking with rage. "*Fiendfyre!*" she snarled to herself. "In the *castle*! Twice in as many weeks." Her glare at Hari was met with an almost beatific smile. "This is your fault."

"My students are diligent in their studies."

She turned and went back to teaching and seemed positively delighted when Hari walked out midway through the class.

X

X

"You wanted to see me, Professor Headmaster?"

"Gah!" Dumbledore patted his chest, while he noted that Professor Snape appeared to be adjusting to young Hari, judging from the fact that the man was an incredibly fast draw on his wand and had not even reached for it when surprised by the boy. "How did you get into my office?"

"Through the secret passage."

"I closed it up."

"Not the one I used." Dumbledore got the strange impression that the dog by Hari's feet was staring up at the lad in hateful admiration.

"Just for my edification: how many of them are there?"

"That you don't know about? I couldn't begin to guess."

"How many are there in general?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"Trust me, you don't."

"I think I do."

"It will only make you uneasy."

"I want to bloody know."

"There are always 49, but they change. I should say that there are always 49 you haven't done anything about-or maybe even just aware of. Two new ones opened up since you patched the holes you'd left before. I'm not sure if that's an isolated incident, but I have to assume that it will be a perpetual effect, given the castle's tendency to make things complicated for you blinders."

"As fascinating as this is," said Snape. "I would like to get this over with."

"I already know you need me to cover when Professor Lupin is busy being a werewolf. What else is there?"

"You what." There was a yelp from the black dog.

"Oh. That is what this is about. I know you don't like teaching extra classes, so I knew you'd want someone else to deal with it for you. And you already know I can do it."

"To our everlasting terror," mumbled Snape.

"So I take it that you're willing?" asked Dumbledore.

"Indeed. I've already been working on a lesson plan to take advantage of the climate this year." Hari had stood and was dragging a desperately struggling dog towards the window. "It was so kind of you to provide them for me." He stepped out into open air and vanished as the dog stared in shock before being pulled into the aether.

"Climate?" asked Snape.

"I hope he doesn't mean what I think he means."

"I'm sure he does."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"I'll tell Poppy to stock up on chocolate."

"That seems wise."

X

X

Blaise watched in frustration as a girl a year his junior had a trio of candles orbiting her gently while she looked over Hari's shoulder at something that they were doing with a piece of paper. He had yet to get a single pebble to hover, although he was having some success at making it wobble.

"You really asked McGonagall about that?" Tam was asking. "While in class?"

"Well yeah. How else would I get an answer?"

"That whole book is illegal!"

"And?"

"So it's not the kind of thing she'll explain in public."

"Do you know the answer?"

"No. I know the book you read, but I never read the other one-it must be recent-so the question never arose. I mean, who ever diagrammed that? If you didn't do both..."

"I did."

"You what?"

"I took apart both those theorems. There's a crossover element."

"I'm sorry. You took them apart?"

"Why not? It was simple enough to do. Just a basic arithmancy table from the first textbook."

"That must have taken forever without the more advanced methods."

"About two days."

"That's all?"

"I mean forty-eight hours."

"Oh."

"Anyway, I found that overlap and I'd like to know if I did it wrong or not."

"If you didn't, you've just made a tremendous breakthrough in Transfiguration knowledge."

"There's a thing. But what I really wanted was for you to look over this set of schema."

Blaise glowered at the pebble, which had stopped wobbling as he focused on the discussion happening in front of him.

"Did I mention that I'm going to be teaching a few lessons this year?"

Blaise whimpered, even the candles orbiting Tam dipped for a moment.

"Yeah. It's because Professor Lupin will be busy being a werewolf." Sprinkles barked angrily and got a whack on the nose. The candles dropped to the carpet and snuffed themselves out. The pebble slammed into a wall.

"What?"

"I didn't mumble."

"You said our Professor will be busy being a werewolf."

"Well he will be. You seem upset."

"They're dangerous!"

Hari blinked. "Who are?"

"Werewolves!"

"He didn't know the Four Ds. He's clearly not a threat."

"Dumbledore is insane," growled Tam. "All I ever did was set a basilisk on the school. This is madness."

Blaise coughed. "You did *what*?"

"Nothing, Blaise. Go back to your studies." Tam seemed to consider something. A moment later, Blaise blinked vacantly.

"What'd I miss?"

"Nothing, nothing." She turned to Hari. "I guess I can use memory charms again."

"Good. Good."

"But seriously..."

"Don't worry about it. We had a Troll two years ago."

"What has been happening here..."

"Things. Get those candles back in the air."

Tam sighed. "Fine."

X

X

"Hari?" Hermione sat beside her friend in Runes. None of their friends had taken the class, most of them preferring the more academic arithmancy to the more plebian runic studies.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"What are you doing?"

"Working on a project."

"We're in class."

"Yes. This way I can ask questions if I need to." Hari was currently scribbling on a piece of paper.

"What are you writing down?"

"The rune scheme hidden behind a faux-tattoo. It's really tiny work."

"You've already covered six pages."

"Like I said."

"Hari?"

"Yes?"

"I've been meaning to ask."

"Hm?"

"Did you get a tattoo over the summer?"

"No."

"It looks like a tattoo."

"It's just part of a cursed seal." Hari paused. "Maybe I should call it a tainted runic scheme?"

"Someone put a tainted runic scheme on you?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Me."

"What?"

"Anyway, I'm trying to work out exactly how it functions."

"You didn't know?"

"I thought it would be an interesting project."

"You've been taking Runes for two weeks and you're already doing this?"

"Well, it seemed prudent." He raised his hand. "Professor, what does this symbol mean?" He waved his hand and a piece of chalk drew a complex series of runes overlapping each other."

"I've never seen it before."

"Well, I had to translate, it loses something."

"A bit of it looks like a container type. It looks like someone badly diagrammed a ward to hold something, but drew it wrong. Maybe. There's a lot of stuff I've never seen, but the bits I know look like warding, containing, and something that looks like a mark for souls."

"That's interesting."

"What did you mean 'translating'?" hissed Hermione.

"Well, it looks the same. I can't really explain beyond that. I don't know what they do and there are plenty of things I had to fudge to the closest similar bit, but it's still pretty good. The whole thing is almost right. It'll do for asking questions, anyway."

"That looks like something from the East."

"I guess? It's just sealing."

"I did a lot of research before this class."

"Shocking."

"It looks like something out of the Heian period."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"That's much more interesting. I'll look into it."

==Omake==

"Ah, Orocchimaru," purred Pein. The pale man was trussed up by several summoned creatures and showing the early signs of severe bruising. "I think we've been having a bit of difficulty in communication."

"You mean how you just came into my village and blew up stuff until I came to talk to you and then wrapped me up in some sort of chameleon's tongue? Because that isn't normally what I think of as a problem in communication."

"No."

"Oh." Orochimaru cocked his head as much as he could move it.
"Then what are you talking about?"

"Your-what did Sasori call it? Oh yes-clandestine war against our interests for the past several months."

"Oh, you mean my opening negotiation for the return of my stolen research?"

"Yes tha-what?" Pein closed his eyes for a moment and pinched what bit of the bridge of his nose was reachable around the piercings. The Animal Path made a similar gesture. "A-are you really telling me that you believe a concerted effort against us is part of negotiations?"

"Of course. What else would it be?" Orochimaru sounded somewhat offended.

"A poorly planned form of revenge against the organization because a twelve-year-old stole things out of the heart of your territory?"

"That reminds me, I need to send him his fee for stress-testing my defenses."

Pein blinked. "Run that by me again?"

"No matter how skilled, a twelve-year-old should *not* be able to waltz into my stronghold and make off with my apprentice and several decades' research."

"Um..." Pein struggled to get a grip on the conversation, which had gone very, very far from what he had been planning. It appeared that

Hari's warping of normality was spreading. He needed to do something about this.

"Can I ask why you're here?"

Pein stared at Orochimaru for several long moments. "No."

"Oh." Orochimaru considered this statement. "In that case, can I go back to what I was doing? Only, I'm a bit indisposed at the moment." Pein held out a hand and slammed Orochimaru into the wall with the Heavenly Gaze of the Omnipresent god. "I'll take that as a 'no' then?"

"Correct."

"Okay." Orochimaru began to whistle a cheerful ditty.

"Cut that out!"

"As you like."

"Leader-Sama?" Itachi looked in through the door, surrounded by his He Who Helps Beyond All Means. "I've done a pretty thorough job of wrecking Orochimaru's stuff out here. How goes the explaining to him that if he doesn't knock it off, I'll come back and finish the job?"

"Terribly," replied Orochimaru. "He seems to have gotten sidetracked."

"Leader-Sama," Itachi sounded disappointed. "You really need to make sure you remember things like that."

"I gather that he was supposed to tell me to stop messing with your projects?"

"Yep."

"And to stop assassinating your spies?"

"Mhmm."

"And generally cease interfering?"

"Bingo."

"Ah. On that subject: I intend for your brother to continue collecting bounties as training. Kabuto informs me that it is doing wonders for him."

"Uh..."

"If Kakuzu needs the handicap though... tell you what: why don't you ask if he needs the handicap of no one else trying to collect his bounties?"

Itachi considered that. "I think I'll just ask him not to murder my brother if they cross paths."

"Sounds like a deal."

"Excellent. Come along, Leader-Sama." A gigantic hand gripped each of the Paths and began to pull the two out of the damaged tower.

"Itachi?" called Orochimaru as the three were almost out of earshot.
"Why didn't you mention that Konan was your sister?"

Pein reached into He Who Helps Beyond All Means and grabbed Itachi, towing him away as the Uchiha flung bolts of Heavenly Illumination at the tower and screaming 'I'll kill him kill him kill him!'

(A/N John)

One thing I find as I write this story is that there are two kinds of plot. The first is the fun kind, like Pansy's experience over the summer. The second is the necessary kind. In this case, there is

a bunch of stuff that needs to be set up and unfortunately, that takes up words because it needs to be done.

(A/N 2 John)

The omake, though... that was just fun to write in general. Spoon gave me the basic idea for how that conversation was going to go and then I took it in the completely opposite direction.

(A/N 3 John)

In case you wondered: Hari genuinely does not understand that Lupin being a werewolf is a secret or that it should be kept that way. Since he's not on a mission, it doesn't occur to him that he needs to maintain operational security.

(A/N 4 John)

Not entirely sure where his experiments in transfiguration are going to go, but I feel certain that it will result in some sort of headache for those few who have managed to maintain some degree of sanity so far.

(A/N 5 John)

Also, the Dawn has more work coming soon.

A Chapter With Crack In

Chapter 48: A Chapter With Crack In

... or Cocaine Plants and Fire

"Lockhart's been busy," commented Blaise. He was looking at a copy of the *Daily Prophet* which detailed Gilderoy Lockhart's reign of terror over western Europe. According to the *Profit*, he had singlehandedly robbed a pair of banks with the use of a Muggle torchlimb and massacred the entire staff in each before going on to lead a gang of thugs in beating old ladies up in Paris and Amsterdam and stealing their pocket change.

Daphne leaned over to read the article inside the paper. "Sixteen old ladies with bruises and missing a dozen galleons in Muggle currency between them?" she asked. "He's definitely in the big leagues now, crime-wise. Did he get bored with kidnapping prisoners," she looked over at Hari for a moment, "and stealing gold from banks?"

Hari was sitting with Tam again; this time he was explaining what the book in front of them said, since it wasn't in English. She kept asking questions about it and he had to reread passages and retranslate, admitting that it wasn't easy to convert magical theorems into English from another language.

"I suppose it could be seen as a good thing," Pansy offered. "I mean, if he's only beating up old ladies, he's not killing more people." She considered the headlines. "Alright, so not killing *more* people."

"I dunno if he was really doing the stuff anyway," said Millie. "I mean, he never seemed all that, well, violent here. Just kinda stupid."

"You never know," replied Blaise, darkly, with a glance at Hari, who had just given Sprinkles a hard yank, pulling him choking away from a plate of ribs that was being served for lunch. "I mean, does Hari

look violent? If you didn't know him," he added hurriedly when Daphne opened her mouth and Pansy looked uneasy.

Meanwhile, Hermione and Tracy were looking over a copy of *The London Times* that had arrived. The lead story there was about the concerns being raised by the West and, indeed, by several countries in Central Africa, over the recent testing of what was believed to be a small-scale nuclear device by one of the Congos. There was an article speculating about the likelihood that a country described by the author as "second world at best" could have acquired nuclear material and some further extemporizing on the possibility of the weapon being a so-called neutron-bomb which destroyed only life, but without the fallout of conventional nukes.

There was a great deal of concern about *where* the weapons were acquired. Both Congos, meanwhile, were claiming total ignorance (which did nothing to help convince anyone) and maintained that they had nothing to do with whatever had caused the explosion in the Republic of the Congo. Additionally, they actively accused the West in general, without naming anyone (France) of using their jungles for illegal weapons tests and trying to blame it on the locals.

The UN had sent "peacekeeping" troops into the region to protect investigators. No one was quite clear on why armed personnel were considered peacekeepers, but the Congos were more concerned that some of the troops were from Belgium and there was some very awkward diplomatic work to be done before those soldiers were quietly shuffled back to just about anywhere else and replaced with people who didn't have a history with the locals. Nevertheless, there was a good bit of unrest and general accusations that Europe (Belgium) was trying to go back to having imperial interests in Africa.

Hermione was in no way reassured by the fact that Tracy had an amused grin on her face during their discussion. Something about it was making her glance at Hari, but she shied away from where that train of thought led, if only to protect a bit of her sanity. Instead, she focused on the fact that defense spending was being raised-which

was only moderately surprising given the nature of governments and money.

An owl winged its way into the Great hall and landed on Hari's left, offering the letter on its leg. Hari detached the envelope, skimmed its contents and set the parchment on fire. Rising, he walked over to the Head Table.

"Professor Headmaster sir?"

"Yes?"

"I need to go on a field trip tomorrow."

"When will you return?"

"Two days, three at the most. It depends on how much trouble there is with getting flights."

"Alright then. Be back by the end of the week for your first class."

"Thanks, Professor."

Lupin stared in horror. This had to be some sort of horrible nightmare that just wouldn't end. There was no way that Albus Dumbledore had just said it was fine that a student go wandering off. And Snape seemed fine with this. Or possibly oblivious. The man apparently didn't notice the entire exchange.

"Snape!" he hissed.

"Yes?"

"Why aren't you objecting?"

"To what?" When Lupin just glared, Snape shrugged. "Have you ever tried to swim up a waterfall?"

"No. What does that have to do with anything?"

"I have better things to do with my time than fight losing battles. Best to focus on making my students miserable and leave Potter to himself. Your dead friend would be proud at how easily he disregards things like rules."

"What do you mean?"

"To date, I believe he's been given well over seven hundred detentions."

"He hasn't even been here that many days!"

"Indeed he has not. Far more prolific than his father. But what I was going to say was that he has yet to show up to one."

"He what."

"Wait, I tell a lie. I think he may have gone to one with Gilderoy last year. That was a few months before the unpleasantness began."

"How does he get away with it?"

"As far as I recall? He just ignored any attempts to punish him."

"He... that worked?"

"Well, on anyone else, it probably wouldn't. But Potter doesn't worry about those things as best as I can tell. I don't think Slytherin has had a point since he got here." The man sounded disturbingly cheerful about that.

It was something that had been nagging at Lupin since he'd arrived and now he could tell what it was: Slytherin was at zero points.

"No one bothers taking points from him anymore," Snape went on. "But I guess that we've just started leaving the points at zero to avoid any concern that he'll do something excessive to lose them."

"He's going on an unspecified, unchaperoned field trip and you're concerned he'll do something excessive ?"

Snape laughed and served himself some pudding as it appeared on the table. "Merlin, this is fun. Oh yes, I'm aware that this is relatively mild. I haven't had any casualties in Slytherin this year, for one thing. It helps that I didn't appoint a Prefect."

"What?"

"And I'm fairly certain he killed a dragon in his first year."

"You're making this up."

"Not really. It's too hard to believe. Oh and he knows about your 'problem' without any clear way to find out and seems unconcerned about it."

"WHAT?"

"Oh relax. I'm not sure if anything bothers him. I'm looking forwards to you trying to forge a connection to him as your friend's son."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm sure it will be entertaining for me."

"But you're a sadist."

"Exactly." Snape give him a sallow grin. "Let's just say that his adoptive family has left him with a... distinct... personality that takes some getting used to."

"What was it you said about casualties in Slytherin?"

"You don't want to know."

X

X

"Hush, Sprinkles." The dog was struggling weakly as Hari stuffed it into a large suitcase. "You'll only be in there until we get off the plane. It's only about twelve hours." There was a whimper as the zipper shut, leaving only the leash extending outwards. Hari draped the invisibility cloak over the luggage and hopped over the fence, trotting around the sight-lines of the security cameras and settling in the waiting area for his flight.

X

X

"See?" said Hari as he let Sprinkles out onto the small boat he'd stolen from the Mexican coast. "That wasn't so bad." He watched absently as the dog rushed over to the side of the boat and began to pee with evident relief. "Now, when we get to Colombia, you're going to need to sleep for a little while. I have some work to do."

The look on Sprinkles's face (as best as a dog could manage) said that Hari could have left him behind.

"You'd have missed me," Hari replied, ignoring the growl of displeasure.

X

X

Hari dragged the unconscious dog through the fields of Colombia until he found the right cocaine fields. It hadn't been particularly easy, given the lack of clear directions from his employer. He found himself wishing he'd learned Spanish, because it would have been nice to be able to ask the natives, but instead he was forced to rely on wandering around, hoping that he'd find someone who spoke English. Or Japanese. Or Mandarin. Or Cantonese. Or Korean. Or Vietnamese. Or, in fact, almost any language commonly spoken

around the China Sea (although, his grasp of languages coming out of the Subcontinent was rather poor).

It took him the better part of a day and a half to find the field belonging to the warlord he was supposed to find. Technically, the contract only specified that he was supposed to kill the man in charge, but someone had thoughtfully added a clause with bonuses for each subordinate removed and hectare of cocaine field burned. It was a shame, really, because it meant he had to first go kill everyone so he could have an accurate count. Oh well.

Hari looked down at the dog beside him. Its head lolled to the side from the blow he'd used. He hit it again to make sure it stayed out, then summoned a hundred Shadow Clones. Each drew a tanto from its shoulder and ghosted into the warlord's territory.

X

X

"Excuse me, sir."

The warlord turned around. Standing in front of him was a scrawny white kid with a dog on a leash. His scarred face twisted into a facsimile of a smile as he considered the options for profit with the boy.

"Are you the one in charge?"

"*Si* ." The warlord's hand lashed out, smacking the boy for talking. It took him a moment to recognize the lack of sensation from his arm and to notice, in fact, the lack of arm in general.

"Oh good. I wanted to be sure I didn't need to go looking." The boy shoved a blade into the warlord's stomach and slashed it open before severing his head and shoving it into a bag. Outside the man's office, a pile of heads was being formed by his clones, who

were diligently executing their captives (who were bound in a line, waiting their turn).

As he listened to the peaceful sound of nothing at all (the prisoners were gagged), he went through the fields stripping them of their plants in case he could find a use for them later. He made a mental note to talk to Professor Snape about it when he checked in on the Hero Water project.

It took a few hours to finish the slaughtering and seal up the heads for transport. The clones spread out to the edges of the warlord's territory and Hari watched with interest as they systematically used Intelligent Hard Work and Pressure Damage to turn the entire area into a wasteland.

X

X

Hari whistled to himself as he strolled back towards the coast. He'd nearly reached his boat when he remembered that he had another stop to make.

X

X

The warlord was roused from his sleep by screams outside. Those were normal, but not at this hour; he had forbidden torture or execution during his naptime to avoid disturbing him if someone were especially inventive. As such, he went to the window with an assault rifle to shoot someone for waking him and saw a gigantic mound of heads in the open space between buildings in his compound. On a stake in front of it was his rival's head.

He stared in a mix of joy and horror. Then he called his lieutenants to him and ordered that the Dawn be paid *immediately*.

X

X

Hari walked through London with his dog and stopped in at his usual residence during the summer. A short conversation with the owners revealed that someone had sent word from the Bank of London that a massive wire transfer from the Cayman Islands had arrived and would he like them to invest it please? Hari decided to consider trying out insider trading over the summer or maybe during the winter break.

He also stopped off at the Davis's house and gave Clare a bouquet of vintage World War II rifles in thanks for directing business his way and to let her know that there was a second satisfied customer.

X

X

"Good morning," Hari said as he sat down beside Tam.

"It is indeed," she replied. "I got sleep last night." She hurriedly held up her hands. "I meditated the night before! And during several classes."

"Good, good." Hari nodded to Blaise, who looked similarly rested.
"How was Defense?"

"Interesting. Professor Lupin seems to be accelerating our curriculum to address the shrinking supply of examples."

"Your previous students reacted badly to the hinkypunk," explained Daphne. "The Fourth Years butchered it, so he had to scramble to sort out lessons for the rest of the week."

"It's been... interesting," added Pansy. "Certainly less... involved... than your classes. But on the other hand, he always seems to be unprepared. Probably because of that accelerated lesson plan."

"DOGGIE!" a blur with a red and gold tie slammed into Sprinkles and snuggled him ferociously.

"I'm a bit disappointed," said Hermione, ignoring the antics of the masked girl. "I had really thought we'd learn more this year. While your classes weren't covering what you were supposed to, I admit that we at least had to think."

"Thank you, Hermione."

"I'd have had the hinkypunk myself, but he pulled it away before I could finish the job," grumbled Millie.

"You weren't even using magic," murmured Tracy. "I think you were supposed to. Not just beat it with your fists."

"It was working!"

"True," conceded the redhead, "but not the point of the class."

"Details."

"Things have been lively, then?" asked Hari.

"Not really."

(A/N John)

So this was one of my favorite chapters so far. I had an absolute blast writing it.

(A/N 2 John)

You might be wondering about the lack of an omake this chapter. It's simple: it's already 2400 words on its own and I didn't have anything in mind to use.

(A/N 3 John)

To let you in on a secret (don't tell anyone) that's really the reason.

(A/N 4 John)

On the other hand, I feel that this chapter can completely stand on its own as a piece of comedy. Seriously I really, really liked writing it.

(A/N 5 John)

Also, the next chapter is one I've been planning for literally months.

ILOVEYOUNESSERSRAWR

Chapter 49: ILOVEYOUNESSERSRAWR

Or Spoon Has Vandalized My Writing Again

"Hari?" said Tracy when Hari sat down with Sprinkles. She shoved a copy of *The London Times* at him. "Know anything about this?"

Hari glanced down at the paper. The headline screamed '*Colombians Have The Bomb?*' and detailed the suspected link between the Republic of the Congo and one or more warlords in Colombia. Apparently, a notorious drug lord had been killed, along with the total annihilation of his entire territory. The Colombian government had been searching and reported that, so far, they had found no survivors of the explosion. The only good news was that the Geiger counters were coming up quiet, so there wasn't a giant cloud of radiation getting ready to be blowing into the greater Americas.

The UN had begun to rapidly deploy more inspectors into a region well known for being unsafe to those who visited for government business. As a result, in addition to their normal peacekeeping force of heavily armed soldiers, they included the Belgians who were cooling their heels in Brussels while waiting for their turn to come up again on the duty roster. It was presumed that firstly, the Belgians had no particular antipathy to the Colombians, since their 'empire' had never extended beyond a single (large) holding and secondly, that if they ended up disrupting the drug lords in the region as part of some sort of imperial ambition, that this was probably not such a bad thing and so what was the down side?

Initial reports were that there had been a larger explosion than had taken place in the Congo more than a month prior. The upside to this one was that it appeared to have killed a particularly unpleasant person and that was to the good. But there was a great deal of

concern that whomever had been testing some sort of weapon in Africa was able to smuggle a larger version to the Americas. Or that the weapons program was based in Colombia. Either way, the permanent member nations of the Security Council had already issued stern press releases decrying the use of such devastating weapons without clearance from them. France was also loudly pointing out that they wouldn't test in Colombia as it was clearly not a nice enough place to deploy nuclear weapons. The fact that these weapons were not nuclear was taken as a counter to that claim and, therefore, it was still possible that France was behind it. That was the position taken by the *Times*, but as a British paper, that was expected and it was presumed that they would have asserted that even if someone other than a Frenchman had actually been seen using the weapon in question.

"What about it?" asked Hari.

"Do you know anything about this?"

"Tracy, I'm not exactly up to date on the secret weapons experiments of major nations at the moment, let alone smaller ones doing it in even greater secrecy. Give me a few more months and I might have tightened up my ability to know that kind of thing."

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh. I'm not sure how else I might know about it. I mean, the world government seems pretty sure that this is an illegal weapons program."

"Do they?"

"Oh yes. Says so in the story on A4."

"Hari."

"How about that." Hari cocked his head.

Against the urging of Daphne, who hissed for Tracy to shut up and Pansy's sudden look of terror, Tracy demanded to know what Hari was talking about.

Hari held up a finger and then rose, dragging Sprinkles away from his kibble and across the Hall to the Ravenclaw table, where he proceeded to pull a newspaper out of a girl's hands and walk away while she blinked in uncomprehending blankness.

"Here." Hari held out the only copy of *The Quibbler* in the school.

X

X

"Hermione?" Tam had looked up from her book (the cover of which was itself covered with construction paper). "I've been meaning to ask..." she was observing Hermione, who was delicately removing pieces of sausage from a link on her fork and shredding them with her pointed teeth. "Your teeth..."

"Hari's fault."

Tam glanced over at Hari, who was watching Blaise and Tracy read *The Quibbler* (both of them with looks of trepidation). "Really?" Tam looked back at Hermione. "Because that looks rather like a ritual to me."

"Hari's fault."

"That's odd. I'm pretty sure there's a warning about it..."

"Hari's. Fault."

"I tried to warn her," said Hari. "I told her she could read one page of the ritual book and she chose to read the page on the ritual to make teeth even."

"But isn't the warning on the next page?"

"Yep."

"Hari's. *FAULT*!"

"You know the worst part?" asked Tam as she squinted a bit. "I don't think they're even."

"WHAT?" Hermione hastily conjured a mirror.

"I see you're already doing advanced wandless conjuration."

Hermione scowled. "They're even."

"Are they?" asked Tam innocently. "I guess my eyesight might not be so good. Maybe I should use a ritual to improve it-oh wait, there's a warning." Tam blinked at the small block of marble she'd instinctively created to block the thrown plate of food. "That's working better, I guess."

X

X

"This can't be real." Tracy was rereading the article for the third time.

"It's *The Quibbler*," said Blaise. "Of course it's not real"

"It sure looks pretty real, though, doesn't it?" said Hari. "Lots of details that people not on the ground wouldn't have. I especially like the diagram of the encampment. It's not like the inspectors are going to be able to draw one of those accurately now."

"So? It could be made up," Blaise retorted.

"Nah. It's pretty much spot on for the layout."

"How do you know that?"

"I still don't believe it," Tracy said. "There's no way Lockhart was heroic." She glared at the paper, the headline of which screamed *Lockhart Saves Kidnap-Victim From Drug Lord!* The text went on to describe a high-ranking United States official in the State Department whose daughter had been kidnapped by a Colombian drug cartel in order to pressure him into making recommendations to his superiors that would be beneficial to their enterprise. What those recommendations were was not specified, but it was hard to think of what kinds of suggestions would possibly be helpful when the entire organization was devoted to criminal activity.

Apparently, the man had realized that the cartel was almost certainly watching him and had opted to not alert his employers. Instead, he had flown to California and wandered around Los Angeles for a week before finding himself in a laundromat run by someone with a very bad "Chinese" accent. Details after that were a bit sketchy for a few days while the team found a plane.

Once they had landed in Colombia, they had proceeded directly to the cartel's territory and proceeded to beat up most of the goons there before getting captured by a very obvious trap. Lieutenant Colonel "Yi Sun-Sin" had devised a plan for their escape that involved chewing gum, sawdust, three pairs of pliers, a large spring, and a decommissioned tank. A second unit of identical personnel helped make the necessary modifications.

The tank had done tremendous damage to the camp and scared the heck out of the evil drug cartel before driving off to the airstrip. The team had escaped without casualties on either side and with the kidnapped victim into the bargain. They had been about to go back to rally the workers when Lieutenant "Pretty Boy" had spotted something on the water off the coast and had said "oh shit, not him!" and insisted that they take off immediately.

Details were once again unclear until the miraculous return of the kidnapped daughter to her overjoyed father, followed by a frantic escape in a custom panel van, chased by several branches of the military police down a crowded Boston street in the middle of rush

hour, doing untold damage to various vehicles and properties when the military police crashed into just about everything in the area other than their quarry.

X

X

"That's odd," said Pansy as she skimmed the copy of *The Profit* she was reading. "They're scraping the bottom of the barrel for Lockhart, aren't they?"

The Prophet declared that Lockhart was guilty of kidnapping a mental patient from the Muggle institution in which he was being kept because he kept claiming to see magic (among other things, which included digging escape tunnels under the sanitarium, setting loose all the therapy animals, and supposedly being a member of a gang of escaped criminals guilty of everything from robbery to evading arrest to making the authorities look stupid). According to the paper, he had entered the hospital wearing a white robe (which was a Muggle thing that indicated that the person in question was a medical professional) and informed the duty-nurse that the man was needed to donate a lung to his former commanding officer. The nurse had pointed out both that the officer in question was currently on the lam and, in fact, wanted for a long list of crimes and that the patient in question had donated lungs on at least two prior occasions. Lockhart had somehow talked her into reconsidering after he had locked her alone with him in a broom closet for an extended period during which her screams of terror were barely muffled and the traumas of which she refused to discuss.

Lockhart had also stolen a gulf stream jet from a runway while the owner waved them away with well-wishing and hope that their trip to save the dying patient from his tubular-microinsefilitoscoliolopolioititus. He had wheeled an unconscious man onto the runway and somehow talked the man who owned the plane (and who had been about to take off) to let them use it to fly to London for specialized treatment before promptly taking off on a direct route to Colombia.

The strangest thing had been the sheer amount of metal on the patient-the man whose plane was used reported seeing the aircraft have trouble getting into the air because of the weight.

He was further guilty of possession of muggle weaponry and the use thereof while in a foreign country for the purpose of terrorizing an important figure in local governance. The *Profit* was not clear on exactly what the victim *did* in Colombian government, but they felt sure that it must be important if arch-criminal Gilderoy Lockhart was trying to cause chaos. It was also noted that Lockhart kidnapped a young woman who was a guest of the man, forcibly abducting her from his manor and forcing her into a muggle "aeroplane" (an obvious form of coercion) to be taken to the Colonies (another black mark on his already dark list). The fact that he did this to a *muggle* woman was considered something of a mitigating circumstance, but only just-the implication was that someone not already blatantly evil might have been considered to be acting rightly in his dealing with a muggle female, but not Lockhart, devil that he was.

There was a separate article detailing the fear that the muggles were developing some new anti-magic weapons. Given the magical world's insular nature, the normally vague and unsubstantiated reporting of the paper was reduced to idle speculation with even less basis than usual (although there was an opinion piece calling for a culling of muggles in order to prevent them from spreading or developing anything beyond those vile "rye-fills").

X

X

"Good evening, Professor."

Snape didn't even look up from his cauldron. "Hello, Potter. What do you want?"

"Well, I was thinking of checking on how your study of Hero Water goes."

Snape sighed and lowered the heat to simmer the potion he was making. "Slowly. I have a full set of classes to teach-classes I will *not* allow you to take over for me, by the way-so I need to work on it during my spare time when I don't have to brew potions for the school. For some reason, Poppy has me making blood replenishing potions by the cauldron-full and even preparing the treatments used for regenerating limbs and organs. I can't think why she might feel those are priority potions with you teaching this year."

"Have you made any progress?"

"Hard to say. Does it count if I've found a lot of things that *don't* tell me anything useful?"

"Not really."

"This is why you're not a potions master. I'm working on it."

"Anyway, the real reason I came by was because I wanted to ask whether raw cocaine has use in potions."

Snape froze. "Ye-es," he said carefully. "There are at least a dozen I can think of offhand."

"Cool--"

"Not a single one of them is legal," Snape continued. "The possession of cocaine in any form is a serious crime and a potions master with it would be in even more trouble."

"Fascinating," Harry replied. He unsealed a large trunk and put it on the floor beside Snape's desk. "Let me know if you find any legal uses for it." He gave the Professor a jaunty wave and left the room.

Snape stared at the trunk in horror for several moments. Then he walked over to a wall and pressed one of the stones in it. The wall slid open, revealing a seemingly endless pantry with dungeonly-

appropriate lighting. Snape levitated the trunk onto a shelf and let the door shut on the Pantry of Ingredients We Don't Have Honest.

X

X

==OUTTAKE==

Hari cocked his head to one side when he felt the beginnings of a tug on his body. That was odd. As it grew stronger, he absently created and substituted with a Shadow Clone which began to tug Sprinkles away. The sensation was similar to when he left home for school. He hoped he wouldn't be away too long.

X

X

"You're sure this ritual is going to work?" asked Severus Snape, looking at the empty patch of carpet in the Headmaster's office.

"Of course, Severus." Dumbledore twinkled cheerfully at the man. He frowned a little. "It's merely taking a little more time than we had expected."

"It's been four hours."

"A lot more time, then. And it's our only hope if we need to keep Voldemort at bay until young Harry is ready to die."

"You're sure we can't have that happen soon?" Snape sounded almost like he was whining.

"Yes, yes. It's imperative to the whole operation that he take at least four more years. With Black on the loose, we can't be sure he will survive that long. He will need to do many difficult things and experience much trouble. Have you heard back from Karkaroff about the Tournament for next year?"

"I got a letter from him yesterday. He says he's fine with it as long as his students will be at risk to 'toughen the pussies up'."

"So we'll tell them that Dragons are acceptable then. Remind me to have them make the chains long."

"Of course. So... where's our 'hero'?"

"It seems that he-or she-is taking his or her sweet time."

"Hello!" Hari looked around. "Good evening other Professor Headmaster, other Professor Snape. What brings me to your office?"

(A/N Spoon 1)

So John forgot to A/N this and I was joking that I'd sneak in my own and publish anyway. He said go for it. So I am.

(A/N Spoon 2)

So, this chapter. John and I giggled the entire way through, him more so than me just because he really, really likes the references we're making to a particular thing I won't spoil.

(A/N Spoon 3)

Also, I won't say which version of events is correct. Keep in mind it IS the Quibbler, but also, it IS Lockhart the Daily Prophet is reporting about.

(A/N Spoon 4)

No. The Quibbler showing up in the story and a passing mention to a Ravenclaw girl does not mean Hari will now adopt Luna into his circle of friends.

(A/N Spoon 5)

The title is all me. You're welcome.

(A/N Spoon 6)

Also big thanks to INeedYouForMyPaganRituals for 1: not using us for your pagan rituals and 2: giving me the idea for our next series of outtakes. I pestered John with various snippets of scenes that could happen and he eventually cracked and found them funny enough to make it better and write it.

The Real Meaning of Being a Werewolf

Chapter 50: The *Real* Meaning of Being a Werewolf

"Good morning, class." The Second Years blanched as they registered that Professor Potter was sitting at the desk with his usual air of calm. "We're going to do a bit of practice to make sure that Professor Lupin hasn't let you get soft." There were some gentle sobs as he motioned for them to leave the room. "In order to assess your skills, I found a few giant spiders in the forest for you to fight."

X

X

Daphne scowled when she saw Hari sitting in the Professor's seat. "We really should have known when we saw the Second Years headed towards the infirmary."

"They let themselves get soft." Hari shook his head, a teacher disappointed in lazy students. "Weaklings."

"Why are you here?" asked Draco Malfoy in a petulant whine. By now, though, it had become clear that he wasn't *really* whining, but that he had been unfortunate enough to be cursed with a voice that always sounded like he was a brat.

"I'm teaching Defense this year during the week out of every month that Professor Lupin is busy being a werewolf." He swatted Sprinkles's muzzle as the dog growled at him and then attempted to rip his arm off, missing entirely.

"What?"

"It's quite simple: during the time around the full moon, Professor Lupin is a bit out of sorts and so I was asked to reprise my duties from last year." Hari paused. "It's funny, now that I think about it, but

it lasts for a week and during it he's lethargic and in severe pain and sometimes a violent monster. Is being a werewolf like having a period?"

The girls in the class were suddenly wooden-faced. "What," Daphne kept her voice level.

"Just wondering on the nature of a magical disease."

"You know," mused Hermione, "they even discriminate against werewolves just like they do against women."

"Worse," commented Millie. "At least women *can* get employed and stuff."

"Why aren't any of you worried?" asked Malfoy, although he looked like he was more curious than concerned.

"Probably the same reason as you," replied Pansy, speaking to him for the first time in nearly two years. "Because when our other option is Hari, somehow a known werewolf just isn't all that scary."

"And now that we have that out of the way," said Hari, "I have some leftover spiders for you to use for practice."

"Joy," muttered Tracy.

X

X

By the time dinner rolled around, news had gotten around the school. The two camps were those who felt that Hari being a teacher again was the sign of a coming apocalypse and those who felt that there was finally a teacher able to do his job. Daphne had to admit that, in fairness, both sides had points.

News had also gotten around about Professor Lupin being a werewolf. The consensus amongst all the upper years (that was to

say: everyone older than First Year) was that this wasn't really so bad, when considered against the alternative—even those who *liked* Professor Potter preferred him in moderation.

The current debate was primarily going on at the Ravenclaw table now, that being a discussion of the nature of lycanthropy and whether or not it was really a form of magical, communicable PMS. One Sixth Year who had pointed out that girls couldn't turn others into girls with just a bite was now clutching himself defensively after his girlfriend had given him a skeptical look that sent all males in the area diving for plates to put over their crotches.

"How do you do this?" hissed Hermione. "Not that I object to reducing prejudice in the magical world, but *how*?"

"I didn't do this," replied Hari, shoving Sprinkles into his kibble. "This is all Ravenclaws."

Hari was watching the head table, where Snape was nursing a headache reliever in a pitcher with a straw and McGonagall was giving Hari a look that was either a sign of having rabies or that she wanted to kill him using her teeth and fingernails to shred his body. Possibly both.

Albus Dumbledore seemed happily unaware of the commotion. He was wearing a bathrobe and was digging into a bowl of cereal with the gusto of someone who had just woken up from their night's sleep. The fact that everyone else was having supper did not appear to bother him.

"I hope you have all had a most delicious breakfast!" Dumbledore declared, standing up and revealing that his robe was trimmed in pink lace. "I understand that there is an intriguing debate going on about the nature of how werewolves work. I am glad to see that my students do not merely accept the status quo and challenge established knowledge in an attempt to further scholarship." He took a draught of coffee and burped hugely. "Better out than in!"

"In order to continue this trend, I am going to allow those of you who wish to stay up beyond curfew in the Library so that you can do further research on what is currently known about lycanthropy so that you may better question it. Everyone is now banned from sleeping tonight and is expected to attend an all-night study session." He paused. "I thank Professor McGonagall for her suggestion to me on the matter." McGonagall went pale as the students began to glare at her murderously. "In addition, we will be using some of the funds set aside for Quidditch this year to summon specialists from St. Mungos to help explore this new hypothesis by using Professor Lupin as a subject of examination, during which time his classes will be covered by the eminent Professor Potter.

"Now off you go to the Library. Your Professors will join you five minutes ago. I am going back to bed."

X

X

"You two didn't think you wouldn't have to study tonight, did you?" asked Hari as he sat down with his friends. Blaise sighed and Tam gave a half-smile.

"I'm almost back to normal," she said. "Give me another week or two."

"Oh good," Hari leaned back as he motioned for Blaise to begin meditation. "I have a project you might be interested in when you're done." He smacked Sprinkles on the head. "You heard Professor Headmaster: no sleeping." He ignored the whine from the floor.

There was a slight chill in the normally stuffy room as students who had been planning to get a night's rest were instead laboring over books under the direction of the Ravenclaw Prefects, who had taken up the task of organizing this impromptu event.

They had broken the groups up and set them to various tasks. The younger years were mostly digging out books as the names came up in texts already being researched, gathering parchment from the research staff to be examined by the collators, and generally being gofers (all except for one particularly small Hufflepuff who had been transfigured by an upper year into a gopher instead).

Hari smacked Sprinkles for the third time. "Make yourself useful," he said and shoved a book between Sprinkles's paws.

"Hari..." began Hermione. "Why did you..." she trailed off. "Is your dog reading?"

Hari didn't glance down at the dog on the floor, who had nudged the book open with his nose and was using his tongue to industriously turn pages. "It would seem so. I told you Sprinkles was a smart dog."

"No you didn't," retorted Pansy as she finished skimming a text and shoved it onto the 'read' pile. "You said that you found him and a bunch of other things."

"Well you should have known."

"Because nothing around you is normal," interjected Mille. "Yes; we know."

"How come you're not reading?" asked Tam as she floated a book to Pansy and began to transfigure a lump of dust into a credenza.

"Of course I am," said Hari. He continued to scribble on pieces of paper with both hands. "How else would I be taking notes?"

"By making it up?" Tracy responded promptly. "You don't have a book open."

"I think I went over this with McGonagall already; why would that matter?" Hari replaced Sprinkles's book when the dog finished it while dodging Hermione's attempts to strangle him. In another

corner, Draco Malfoy thanked his lucky stars that he was out of her range.

X

X

Professor Lupin stumbled into the Great Hall two days later, forcing himself to walk to the Head Table and collapsed gratefully into a seat. It took him several minutes to notice that people were staring at him in sympathy. Most people were. The rest were just looking blankly like they were waiting for the punchline. A Seventh Year girl approached him shyly.

"Professor Lupin?"

"Mm?" he managed, his head still resting on the table.

She held out a package and waited for him to look up. "We took contributions from everyone who had some to spare. We're so sorry we didn't realize you needed this sooner."

Lupin took the package and managed to use a knife to open it. Inside was a selection of chocolates and a bottle labeled 'Midol'. "What?" His mind slowly registered the objects.

"We took up a collection and Marian-Jesse had a spare bottle." She leaned in. "It helps with the... aches after."

"After..." Lupin reread the bottle's label and blinked in confusion as his memory jogged itself. "I don't... do you people *think I get a period?*"

"Professor Potter pointed out that being a werewolf is like having one. If we'd known you weren't prepared for it, we'd have made sure to share already."

"Professor Potter said WHAT?" Lupin looked over at the only person in the Hall not paying any attention to him. The boy was quietly

eating what looked like a bowl of rice with... chopsticks? He was really going to need to pay more attention to this school. And next to the boy, the bastard was on his back, giving the doggie equivalent of rolling around on the floor, laughing his canine ass off.

"Well, he pointed out that you're achy for a few days before the full moon, then a slavering monster, then achy again for a few days..."

And now Snape was laughing too, the greasy son of a bitch. "Why?"

"I don't think anyone understands how Professor Potter thinks, Professor Lupin. We're happier that way."

"So I need to resign now?"

"NO!" she screamed.

He covered his ears in pain. "Ow. I think I may be deaf. Why not?"

"Because Professor Potter..." she paused, aware that Professor Potter always knew what was happening. "Professor Potter is a fine, brilliant teacher, but best in moderation so that we can properly absorb his important teachings," she managed in a forced, cheerful tone.

"But... but I'm a werewolf. Shouldn't that... well... bother you?"

"We have Professor Potter," she replied. "Why would a werewolf scare us?"

He winced as he thought back to this girl's response to the boggart. She had been one of the ones conjuring silver dust. "Alright, alright." He was having some trouble grasping the concept that these people seemed genuinely unconcerned about the whole werewolf thing.
"But what about the parents, then?"

"What about the parents?"

"Won't *they* object to their kids being taught by a dark creature?"

"Why would they object?"

"Well..."

"I mean, Professor, why would they know there was something to object to ?"

Lupin gestured at the post owls flying in at that moment. "I don't know, somehow I just have this feeling."

"Oh that?" She smiled in a razor-sharp way. "We already agreed that no one is telling their parents. We remember last year. And we've had words with Firsties who might have thought about it. They've been most compliant."

"Oh." Somehow his world was crashing around his ears without actually collapsing. "The werewolf thing really isn't a problem?"

"Take some of the Midol *before* the pain starts," she answered and trotted away.

Lupin glared over at Professor Snape. "Quit laughing!"

"At the fact that the thing that almost killed me was really just having PMS? No, I'm going to enjoy this for a long time."

Lupin sighed. "I should be grateful that James never thought this up or I would have spent my school years in a tutu."

Snape fell out of his chair. "You would have!"

"I really hate you."

"The feeling-" Snape struggled to get air. "Is mutual."

X

X

==Outtake==

"You see," began Dumbledore, eyes twinkling disarmingly, "we find ourselves in a bad spot. We strongly suspect that a particularly bad dark lord will be rising back to power and the one destined to defeat him is unable to do it at this time."

Hari just stared blankly at Dumbledore with an expression that said 'and where do I come in here?'

"To remedy this problem, we summoned a being able to hold off the threat until the destined lad in question is ready to face his destiny."

More blankness.

"You're the one we summoned."

Hari nodded. That made sense. "Sounds reasonable." He pulled a sheaf of paper from his cloak. "How long is this likely to take, other Professor Headmaster?"

"It will be *years* before he's ready. I'm very sorry about the inconvenience... why are you smiling like that?"

Hari realized that his head was in danger of falling off at the jaw from his grin. He pulled out a pencil and scribbled somethings on the paper. He mumbled for a tie about carrying the various numbers and Snape was certain that the boy was actually rambling off a complete arithmantic formula that sounded vaguely like the killing curse. "Do you need me to hunt the target or keep the principle alive?"

"The latter," Dumbledore replied, still not entirely sure he knew what was going on.

"Oh good." Hari made a few more notations and handed Dumbledore the paper. "This is your invoice. I've broken it down into monthly payments to make it easy for you, and you'll note the expense account I added as well."

"Merlin above and below!" Dumbledore blanched. "You want *how much*?"

"That's the monthly rate, Professor Headmaster. The total is two lines down."

Dumbledore's mouth dropped open.

(A/N John)

I'm back! Spoon didn't get her hands on the chapter. I think. She does the uploads, so it's entirely possible that she will vandalize this after I finish.

(A/N Spoon)

I love this chapter so much oh my goodness.

(A/N 2 John)

For those of you wondering about the A-Team references last chapter, they're going to happen on occasion, but probably not as detailed.

(A/N 3 John)

Also to clarify something: no, Lockhart is not in prison. You may recall a jailbreak at the end of Second Year...

(A/N 4 John)

Did I mention that for once, I can't blame Spoon for this stuff? I was just having Hari say that he didn't understand why Professor Lupin was so scary, since he just gets achy, then angry, then achy and that it sounded like his Aunt Konan and things just unraveled from there. Spoon wasn't even sitting next to me when I had the thought.

(A/N 5 John)

I'm also enjoying the Outtake. No, I'm not sure if its canon with the story. I'm working on that question.

Forearmed is Forewarned Right?

Chapter 51: Forearmed is Forewarned. Right?

Professor Lupin's return to teaching was marked by a certain welcoming air, especially among the younger students who seemed to feel that having a werewolf teaching them wasn't even really remarkable when compared to their week of Professor Potter. It was a strange and somewhat pleasant experience to be welcomed without reservation by so many people for the first time since he was about eight. It didn't help him deal with the casualties among his lesson-plan, but it was still refreshing.

He had been planning to put it off, but instead decided to just go ahead and do the lessons on werewolves already, since he wasn't going to have any kind of demonstration for it. Despite his reservations (he half expected that the Seventh Years were going to try to kill him because of the subject of the lesson), things went remarkably well. He had felt incredibly uncomfortable explaining the various weaknesses of werewolves to the older years (who had been wearing expressions of murderous polite interest), but other than that, it had gone excellently. He had taken a certain pleasure in their expressions when they learned that silver was just a mild annoyance to werewolves, although their proposals of iron spikes through the brain and grapeshot had been utterly terrifying-and admittedly likely to work.

It was taking more effort to get used to Snape's amusement at him at every meal. And the fact that he was having difficulty with knowing that Black was snickering all the time. Also, he had begun to get daily letters with tips on how to deal with matters that he had always considered to be of a nature unrelated to him. He suspected Snape knew what was in them, too, since every time he opened one and flushed bright red, the man gave him that puppy-killing smile that was probably as close as he got to happy expressions.

X

X

Lupin wasn't sure why there was mounting tension as October progressed. It seemed like everyone was waiting for something to go wrong (or, more terrifyingly in the case of his older students, right). Everyone he asked gave him answers that only made him more and more worried. For one thing, as best as he could understand, two years before, Halloween night had been marked by the invasion of the castle by an army of Trolls.

Apparently the army had marauded through the castle for months before finally coming out into the open October 31st. At that time, they had stormed the Great Hall, chanting about the glorious deaths of James and Lily Potter and singing songs to the gods while carrying biers overflowing with the corpses of their victims (older Slytherin students) and preparing for ascension bodily to Valhalla. Each person he asked somehow managed to add some new insanity to the tale. By the time he was done, he had been given to understand that the Trolls had been fought off singlehandedly by Hari Potter-Professor Potter-while he chanted an Eda and cleaved the leading Troll's head off after dueling it in single combat with a butter knife.

Reading between the lines, an ever-important skill in day-to-day life at Hogwarts, Remus had worked out the most likely course of events as they had actually occurred. It was in no way any more reassuring than the tales he had been told.

If he was understanding correctly, Hari Potter, at age eleven, had slaughtered a healthy portion of the Slytherin house without almost anyone except a few Professors knowing, and even fewer caring. And also without getting in even the slightest bit of trouble for the deaths. At the same time, the traditional power structure of the house had been almost entirely broken that year as a result of the many untimely deaths. On the upside, there had only been one Troll and it had indeed been killed by Hari Potter, although it had been in

a girl's bathroom (and wouldn't James be proud his son was in a girl's bathroom at eleven?) and there had only been one girl in danger at the time. Lupin was beginning to wonder if he had been hit on the head more than he remembered during his time at Hogwarts.

On the other hand, that had been nothing compared to the confusion surrounded last year. Something had petrified Mrs. Norris IV during the feast and no one seemed to be sure what it had been. The fact that the famously inventive Hogwarts rumor mill hadn't come up with an explanation was actually a bit more disturbing than the crazy bits that people had been managing to add to the whole Troll incident. To tell the truth, no one seemed to have any guesses about why there had been a string of petrifications over the course of the year to the point that the Headmaster had begun to just have students *stacked in broom cupboards!* Everyone basically held that it was probably Professor Lockhart's fault and that Professor Potter was somehow responsible for the attacks stopping, although no one had any idea how. And the lack of embellished description of a battle was quite worrying. Although he was beginning to have his suspicions about Ginny Weasley, who was rumored to have left school early around the time the attacks ended... the girl had an uncanny grasp of magic and didn't use a wand. Plus her glowing red eyes just made Remus nervous.

Regardless, he didn't have time to worry about it, since the week before Halloween happened to contain the full moon.

X

X

"Hello, Lupin," Snape managed to give the civil greeting a suggestion that he had offered the man a dip in boiling feces.

"Hello, Snape."

"You seem remarkably cheerful for this time of the month."

"Uh... I guess my transformation wasn't so bad?"

Snape paused and then covered his mouth as he began to laugh. "Their gifts worked, didn't they!" The werewolf's blush was all the admission he needed. "They *did*!"

X

X

"Hari?" Tracy said as she passed him a copy of the *Times*. "Care to explain?"

"It looks like you have a copy of the paper?"

"I was talking about the disappearance of a top aeronautics engineer from his home in the middle of London at noon."

"What about it?"

"Did you do that?"

"Why would you think that?"

"*Why* did you do it?" She paused. "You know, you might be right that you didn't... he turned up two days later, spouting some story about a blond man and a crew of gun toting heroes."

"I think the full story is in the *Quibbler*."

"Uh..."

X

X

"Hari." Pansy's voice was flat.

"Mmm?"

"Tomorrow is Halloween."

"And?"

"Well, for one thing, we thought it would be good if someone reminded you."

Hari didn't look up from the runic array he was doodling. He paused and made a 'go on' motion that Pansy was tempted to take offense at even now, but decided not to pick losing battles.

"But we were also a bit concerned."

"Oh?"

"You see, for the last two years, something bad has happened on Halloween."

"Really?"

"Yes." Pansy gritted her teeth. "There was a Troll two years ago. And last year something began attacking students."

Hari cocked his head. "I thought you said something bad happened?"

Pansy covered her face with her hands and sighed. "Those were bad."

"Why?"

"Never mind that. I wanted to know if you had seen signs of anything that might be 'interesting' to you recently."

"Again: why?"

"Because I would like to be forewarned."

Hari pulled a Colt M1911 from a seal on the inside of his robe and offered it to her with a wandless levitation as he scribbled. "Here."

"What is this?"

"You're now forearmed, that's like being forewarned."

Pansy reluctantly took the firearm and held it carefully. The wrong way. "Uh..."

Hari sighed and set aside his work. "Come on," he motioned for her to follow him out of the Common Room.

"Where are we going?" she asked, not bothering to point out that curfew had long started and that he had two students who were apparently expecting instruction.

"The Forest. We need to teach you how to use that thing."

X

X

"You look like hell," said Daphne as Pansy groped around the table blindly.

"I've been up all night."

"You smell like smoke."

"Like I said."

"Hari?"

"Hari."

X

X

The Feast was well underway when Dumbledore cleared his throat. He had come to the occasion dressed as a Catholic nun, complete with wimple. To the amusement of the Muggle Studies Professor and few others, he kept floating by his headdress. He had added his own touches, of course, including sixteen pounds of gold jewelry with depictions of Baphomet and saints being abused in various ways, two rulers at his belt that were not only bloodstained, but still dripping, and a steering wheel.

"Once again, we gather to celebrate the deaths of my dear friends at the hands of a monster. Their loss is felt keenly by all of you, which is why you are so joyous. Thankfully, Mister Potter grew up with a... a loving... family and so does not feel this loss, so it is less disgusting than it might be that you are all cheerful at their demise.

"With two interesting events in as many years, I was strongly expecting that Sirius Black would be striking this evening." He broke off as Professor Lupin began to cough horribly. "I'm sorry, are you alright?" Dumbledore motioned to Hagrid and the half-giant gave Lupin a smack on the back that sent his face into the mashed potatoes. "Given that, I have locked down the castle to be sure that he can't get in-are you okay, lad?" Dumbledore's face showed concern as Lupin began to struggle to breathe. When Lupin nodded, Dumbledore continued, "as I was saying: we are perfectly safe from Siri-Poppy, would you please see to him?

"In addition, I made sure that the dementors are *not* anywhere near the castle. I cannot be certain, of course, but I do think that I have managed to deal with most of the more serious-why is that dog barking?-threats."

It was about that time that Professor Lupin, recovered from his loss of air, got annoyed at Professor Snape pointing and laughing, and, in a fit of childish pique, flung a leg of roast chicken at the man, who (having been in a school with Hari for two years) ducked promptly, allowing it to fly overhead and strike Professor McGonagall. As Lupin stared in open-mouth horror, Dumbledore smiled warmly and drew his wand. "Let us thank Professor Lupin for initiating the food fight."

He jabbed his wand at the table and a trio of chickens donned little improvised suits of armor and began to form a phalanx with their cadre of breadstick-and-roll soldiers, some of whom began to hurl food randomly at the students below. He then sat back down and began to eat his meal as chaos erupted.

Draco Malfoy had been learning in the last two years. He had not gained much knowledge of magic, but he was learning to avoid Hermione Granger and any possibility she might throw things. It was because of that that when he saw that food was beginning to fly, he made a dash for the exit and hid in the Entrance Hall until the noise died down. It was quite interesting to listen to.

The Hufflepuffs quickly formed ranks, the youngest ducking under the table in fright as their peers began to grab dishes to hide behind and the upper years began to conjure shovels to hurl larger amounts of food with. The Seventh Years were working to defend their space with judicious use of banishing charms as taught by Professor Potter, sending airborne foodstuffs back at the originator with excessive force.

The Slytherins being Slytherins, the only people they trusted less than their own was everyone else, so they used the advantage of having a wall at their backs to focus their efforts (as best as a disorganized mob could manage). The ones who were able to think strategically (and most the remaining upper students were among them-stupidity having not been a survival trait in recent years) began to use shield charms and banishers to keep the largest of the attacks away. There were too many projectiles to stop them all, but at least the turkey that the Weasley Twins had lobbed was blocked.

Ravenclaw was trapped between rivals and the students were clearly wishing that they could go back to studying. Once they had stowed their books safely under the tables, they began to return attacks with the viciousness instilled by Professor Potter and fueled by annoyance at interruption of their peaceful reading. Their table was quickly cleared of food as they began a wholesale assault on the entire room, finding their arsenal quickly replenished and set

about trying to get as much of the pumpkin pie aimed at Professor Lupin as they could manage.

Gryffindor was not left out, of course, but they were ably lead by the terrible trio: Fred, Gred, and Girl-Tobi. The former two had more breadth of skill and were transfiguring things to be thrown (although *why* they wanted to hurt dildo-shaped drumsticks was unclear) as well as screaming at the top of their lungs for the sons of bitches under their command to get back in their ranks and to hold fast. Percy of all people had conjured a peaked cap and was screaming in an Eastern European language while flinging spoonfuls of peas at anyone of their house who appeared to be faltering.

At the head table, Professor Lupin was taking advantage of the opportunity to attack Black and, to the horror of the staff (aside from the Headmaster, who was calmly having pudding behind his defensive line), was flinging everything in arm's reach at the dog already covered in gravy and slices of ham. To the further horror of the staff, the dog had made a crude sort of catapult using plates and some long French loaves to hurl things *back*. And possibly worst of all, it was hard to tell who was winning (although the dog had help from Ravenclaw).

X

X

Dumbledore looked up as a quartet of breadsticks flew at him. One of his chickens dove in front of the flying food and took them to the breasts, falling to the table and twitching as the other chickens rushed over. One began to use its stubby wings to pump madly at the fallen one's breastbone while the other placed the empty space where its head had been near where the downed victim's head should be. The hall stopped and watched as, after a moment, the two stopped their actions and looked down, taking their helmets off and then waving at the breadstick soldiers, who formed up and began to lift the fallen chicken onto their shoulders and carry it off towards the staff exit.

"Well," said Dumbledore. "I do believe it's time for the cleanup. Mops will be provided." He considered things for a moment. "And I think it would be most helpful if Professor Potter rounded up our missing food before they go rot somewhere. Thank you."

X

X

==Outtake==

"You're a hero!" insisted Dumbledore. "You're not supposed to charge money."

Hari had conjured a comfortable chair and was now sitting in it; it was not lost on either man that he had not drawn a wand to do so. "You mispronounced that, other Professor Headmaster. It's 'mercenary'."

"The spell was supposed to conjure a hero!"

Snape raised a finger. "Professor He-Professor?"

"What?" Dumbledore snapped.

"I think we specified that we wanted someone able to hold off the Dark Lord."

"Right; a hero."

"That's where I was going with this," Snape said slowly. "I don't know if the ritual actually called for a *hero* ."

"What?" Dumbledore looked slightly ill.

"If it helps," said Hari, who had been watching with vague interest, "I'm fairly certain I can defeat whomever you need dealt with."

"It doesn't," Dumbledore said bitterly.

"So... about my fee?"

Dumbledore frowned for a moment. "Will you accept gold?"

"I'll have it tested chemically, but yes."

Dumbledore's face brightened considerably. "I think we can arrange payment then. You start immediately."

"I've got nothing to do for a while, sure. Remind me, how long do you expect this to take?"

"Three years at least, possibly four."

"I thank you for your business. I'll expect a one-month retainer up front."

"You what?"

"I fully understand if you don't have the cash on hand. I'll be in London, feel free to contact me when you've gathered the funds. Just send a letter to my offices." He placed a card on Dumbledore's desk and dove out the window, vanishing instead of falling to his death.

(A/N John)

Well, this chapter has been a long time in coming. Sort of. Actually, a good bit of it was not part of my original plan at all and just sort of happened because of one damn line that I wrote in jest and then found had spiraled out of all control.

(A/N 2 John)

The line in question referring to forearmed.

(A/N 3 John)

On the upside, the bumper crop of evenings I had recently means that I now have a surplus of chapters readied. So there is good news in there.

(A/N 4 John)

Also, things start getting a bit... weird shortly. And they'll nicely jump some more rails.

(A/N 5 John)

I can honestly say I'm not sure how long Third Year will be. I know I need to deal with Christmas and maybe a few other things, but without much of an active threat, it's likely that things will be pretty peaceful.

(A/N 6 John)

Oh well, given what happened the last time I thought that...

Who Let the Dogs Out

Chapter 52: Who Let the Dogs Out

... Or Hari Teaches Remus the True Meaning of a Right Hook

Hari looked up from the owl-delivered letter. "Do you think we're going to move on from the basic Celtic runes today?" he asked Hermione.

She looked up from her book of Celtic runes. "Considering that I'm reading this for class today?" she replied. When Hari only cocked his head to the side, she closed her eyes. "No."

"Oh good. I'll see you in class."

X

X

Hari hummed as the plane came in for final descent at O'Hare. It wouldn't have been professional to use other methods of transportation; his dad had always told him that the best part of the job was getting to see the world. Uncle Kisame always added that was supposed to include then meeting interesting people and killing them, but his dad never laughed.

He gave the nice flight attendant a polite smile and wave on his way out of the jet. Uncle Sasori had told him to always be polite to the help when they were helpful, in case you needed them to be helpful again. Besides, she had been kind enough to ignore him not stowing his luggage overhead for the flight. Just because he wouldn't have obeyed if she'd asked didn't mean that he wasn't grateful for her being nice.

When he got out of the airport, he unzipped his suitcase and let the dizzy dog out. "See, Sprinkles? That wasn't so bad, was it?" He

patted the dog. "At least this time we're not going to have to take a boat, right?" He had noticed that his dog was not good with boats. "Let's go get something to eat."

While he did so, a few clones broke away from him into an alley and proceeded towards the South Side. Thankfully, the client had been more particular about the target, so it only took them a few minutes to identify the particular building they wanted. Then they settled in to wait.

X

X

Hari smiled at the flight attendant who let him onto the plane. It wasn't the same one, but she had no doubt needed to continue on to another flight as part of her job. Nevertheless, it was always good to make a good impression on people who would do things for you— even if you could do it yourself, you never knew when you might want someone else to do it for you (Uncle Sasori again).

He patted the top of his suitcase when he settled into his seat in first class. "Just another flight, nothing to worry about."

X

X

The clones had been watching and now accounted for every subject. Half of them spread out to pay a visit to various street corners and homes of mothers with adult children. The rest began to gather chakra.

X

X

"Good morning, Hari."

"Hey, Tracy." Hari absently swatted Sprinkles away from a link of sausage.

"Did you hear about Chicago?"

"What about it?"

"Some big gang war. One gang lost their heads and blew up the other gang's base of operations, along with everyone who lived in the building. And killed everyone not there at the time."

"No, I hadn't heard." Hari looked up fascinated. "Was anyone hurt?"

"... I just said the building blew up and a bunch of people were killed."

"So no then?"

Daphne found herself actually smiling as she got to be in the position of comforting her friend about the insanity around them instead of the usual configuration. "Let it go, Tracy."

"Hari?" Tam asked as she watched the puppy she'd conjured turn into stone, then gelatin desert, then back to puppy. "Where are you going?"

"I want to have a word with Girl-Tobi."

"It's two in the morning."

"And?"

X

X

The Fat Lady didn't wake up when her portrait swung open. Sprinkles was wide-eyed that Hari had just used some sort of override word to get by without needing to use the password. The

dog was so stunned that Hari had to drag him over the lip of the portrait-hole and into the Common Room.

"Good... morning, Professor Potter," greeted a Seventh Year who was pouring over a model of a Quidditch Pitch. "What brings you to Gryffindor?"

"Just want a word with Girl-Tobi."

"Oh. I just saw her go by with a bucket of ice-water and humming something that I'm having trouble getting out of my head."

"I thought so." Hari gave Oliver Wood a polite nod and walked up the stairs towards the boy's dorms. Sprinkles looked around longingly as his butt struck each stair on the way upwards.

Hari pushed open the door to the Third Year dorms just in time to see Girl-Tobi about to dump the bucket on the ginger sometimes-idiot. "Girl-Tobi!" he said sharply, causing her to drop the bucket bottom-first onto Ron's face.

"OW! Fred, George, I'm going to *kill* you!" Ron snarled as he tried to rise and spilled the water all over himself. "MOTHERFUCKERS! My balls are freezing!"

"Your sister hasn't been keeping up with her practice. You need to speak to her at breakfast."

"Professor Potter?" asked Ron blearily as he wiped water from his eyes. "Why're you here?"

"I wanted to have a—" Hari's words were cut off as Sprinkles spotted something and went mad, leaping at Ron with jaws open, snarling murderously.

"OHMERLINNOIDON'TWANTTO..." Ron trailed off mid-terrified shriek when Sprinkles was yanked up short by Hari and landed on his back, flailing wildly. "Die? Oh."

"Ron!" Neville was reaching for his wand as he roused himself. "If there isn't a good reason for waking me up, I'm going to kill you so badly your mother will be in pain."

"I'll help," added Seamus as he grabbed at the hunting knife he kept at his bedside on a recommendation from Professor Potter (who had instructed them to make sure they had extra options for dealing with threats, especially when waking up).

Ron dodged to the side as Dean Thomas decided not to wait for threats and just fired a low-grade piercing hex (more like a mild scratching hex) at him without waking up.

"Bad Sprinkles!" Hari scolded, beginning to batter the dog about the face with a rolled up newspaper. In his other hand, he held both the leash and a spray bottle, which he began to use liberally on the giant dog's nose. "Excellent responses, lads," he added to the boys who were now awake (aside from Dean Thomas, who had rolled over and pulled a pillow over his head).

Girl-Tobi took the opportunity to wander out of the room while the rest of the boys tried to get a handle on the situation.

"I'm proud of Girl-Tobi; impromptu ambushes to ensure proper alertness is an excellent addition to the curriculum."

X

X

Albus Dumbledore walked creakily down from the bedroom above the Headmaster's office. He was getting too old for stairs. He sat down in the chair on the far side of his desk and reached across to collect some paperwork. He glanced up, "Good morning, Professor Potter," he said and bent his head to get to work. "Wait..." he looked up again. "Why are you in my chair?"

"I had something I have to tell you."

"Up!"

"It's importa-"

"UP!" Dumbledore snapped. He glowered when his comfy chair began to float two feet above the ground. "Thank you. Now get out of my seat." When Hari had hopped down, Dumbledore rose and walked around his desk. He glared at his seat for a moment and then gripped a leg and pulled it back to the floor, sitting down and frowning as the chair bobbed back upwards gently. "You are a wit."

"Thank you, Professor Headmaster."

"You said you had something important." It was distressingly hard to give someone a proper imposing stare from two feet above the ground, and not staying in place but going up and down in a rather relaxing sort of way.

"You know Professor Kitty?"

"If you mean Professor McGonagall, yes. And I will thank you to never call her that to her face. Or her back. Or, in fact, in any way that she might learn of it."

"Okay."

"What about her?"

"You know how she can turn into a cat?"

"Yes."

"Is that common? Turning into animals in general, I mean."

"Not terribly. I have a feeling I'm not going to like the answer to this: why do you ask?"

"Well, were there supposed to be any others in the castle?"

"No." Dumbledore paused. "Wait. What do you mean by 'were'?"

"Well, the man who was pretending to be a rat left an hour ago."

"The *who* did *what*?"

"The man—" Hari began and was waved into silence.

"Yes, yes. Thank you. Where was this rat?"

"Gryffindor dorms. Third Year boys."

"Ah. The Weasley rat, then. Or, rather, the Weasley not-rat... who has been in my castle for the last twelve years... and slept in the beds of my wards... this is getting worse by the moment it seems." Dumbledore scrubbed at his face with a hand. "Alright. What's done is done. I'll have a word with the Weasleys later and figure out how to explain this mess. In the meantime, if you see any other not-animals, please let me know immediately." Dumbledore sighed again. "Why are you holding your dog up?"

Hari was lifting the massive dog almost a foot off the floor by its collar. To achieve this, Hari had stood on the chair he'd been occupying. The back of the chair. The dog pawed desperately at the leather choking it, tongue lolling. "Well, you said..."

Dumbledore blinked. Then it caught up. "Are you saying that your dog..."

"Is a not-animal? Yep."

"How long have you known?"

"Since I found him."

"It's turning a little bluish."

"Yeah."

Dumbledore decided to worry about that later. There was someone in his castle who wasn't supposed to be there. "Why hasn't he turned back?"

"Special collar I got for him."

"I see. Do you know what he looked like normally?"

"Stubby Boardman."

Dumbledore froze. "Please take the collar off him."

Hari looked downcast. "But then he won't be Sprinkles."

"I don't really care. Do it anyway."

"Alright." Hari undid the buckle and the dog slammed butt-first into the floor and whined for a moment before transforming into a scraggly man who seemed to be trying to work out where to hide.

"I'm innocent, I swear Headmaster. Please don't kill me!"

Dumbledore conjured shackles that bound the terrified man to the wall. "I'm listening."

"I didn't betray the Potters! I wasn't the-"

"Secret Keeper. Yes. I know."

"You did?"

Dumbledore's response was to just look blankly at the man.

"Right. Albus Dumbledore. I didn't kill those people either!"

"Oh? I recall you being found standing in the midst of the destruction, laughing like a loon." Dumbledore cocked his head. "I love alliteration."

"It was laugh or cry."

"Well, with the loss of your friends..."

"I meant Peter."

"Why would you be upset after killing him?"

"Because I didn't!" Black said pleadingly. "I was *going* to, sure. But the little fucker did the job for me. Sort of. I thought he'd been trying to kill me with the explosion and so I was laughing that he'd missed me and only gotten himself." Black looked down. "And twelve innocents, come to think of it."

"Well, that's an interesting story."

"But he fooled me, too. He survived. Little bastard was always good at getting out of jams. Cut off a finger and hid in a sewer during the mess."

"And you know this..."

"Because I saw him in the paper. Sitting on the Weasley kid's shoulder."

"Sitting on... he was a rat animagus?"

"Uh. Yeah."

"Which makes James the stag. That explains a lot." Dumbledore stroked his beard. "I wonder why Remus is at the Gargoyle." A wave of his wand released Sirius and conjured another chair. "Have a seat. We have some work to do now."

"What do you mean, Headmaster?" asked Sirius as he sat down, enjoying being in human form.

"Well, the person who is guilty of your crimes has gone missing. You are a mildly wanted criminal-well, technically you're wanted as

Stubby Boardman, since no one was going to admit to a pair of breakouts so close together."

"I'm all for going and hunting the son of a bitch down and killing the everloving shit out of him," Sirius offered. He turned to Hari. "By the way, you are a terrifyingly familiar person. It's rather like if James had Lily's sadistic streak. I'm so proud of you for pranking me for two months because they're not here to do it."

"Who?"

Sirius looked crestfallen.

"I will brief you on your godson later," Dumbledore said. "You'll need it. Trust me on this."

The door slammed open. "Professor Dumbledore! I think Sirius Black is in... no... cent." Remus trailed off as he spotted the man in question sitting in a comfortable chair, apparently engaged in conversation.

"Hey Remus!" Sirius said as Remus closed the distance between them and punched him in the face. "OW! What was that for!"

"Peeing in my soup."

"I was aiming for Snivellus!"

"Oh. That's okay then." Remus punched Sirius again.

"What was that one for?"

"Going after Peter instead of looking out for Harry."

"I'm right here, you know," said Hari. "I'm glad I ended up with my dad."

"You ended up with-" Sirius began before being punched a third time.
"What was *that* for?"

"Laughing at me for the last month and a half."

Sirius frowned. "It's not near the full moon," he said, looking up from his position on the floor. "So why are you PMSing now? OW!" The last was because Remus had just kicked him in the face.

"You did that wrong," said Hari.

"What?" asked both Sirius and Remus.

"Your technique is lousy. We're going to have to work on that."

Sirius staggered to his feet and took a swing at Remus, pitching forwards when Remus stepped back.

"Better," commented Hari.

As Sirius struggled up, a book smacked into the back of Remus's head. Sirius beamed. "Cool! That works. Thanks for the training, kid." He went to clap Hari on the shoulder and missed when the boy was suddenly elsewhere, slamming face-first into the puffy arm of the chair and rebounding to land on the floor.

X

X

==Outtake==

Dumbledore scowled when the boy vanished.

"What's wrong?" asked Snape.

"I hit the brat with something like a dozen compulsion charms, fifteen loyalty hexes, and the Imperius. Twice."

"So he's under your control now?"

"No."

"He resisted all those? You're really good at them, though."

"No... he just didn't seem to notice I'd cast them on him."

"Oh."

"No Occlumency shields either."

Snape was about to speak, paused, and changed what he said. "You didn't get in?"

"Nope. Even tried direct eye contact and now I have a headache."

"Huh."

"It feels like a magical headache, too."

Snape nodded. Magical headaches resisted potions. "I'll get some acetaminophen."

"Thanks." Dumbledore replied.

X

X

Hari found that the family in the Limehouse district didn't remember him, but quickly ingratiated himself despite their suspicions with a mastery of Japanese with a Kyoto accent that astounded them. He also rented his office space (after removing the previous owner and changing the deed in the city records). He would have purchased it the normal way-he planned to do that back home once he got around to heading back to London-but he wanted to be sure that he had his address when the employer contacted him.

He had emblazoned a red cloud on the frosted glass in his door (he'd gotten the idea from a movie he'd seen when passing a theatre. Or maybe it was from books. Regardless, he felt that it gave his office a finished sort of look). While he was at it, he'd taken out

ads in Soldier of Fortune and sent letters to his previous clients, soliciting work at discounted rates in order to build up a name for himself. He also had Shadow Clones beginning dossiers on various persons of interest and had begun to build his network in London since he had some time.

That the letter saying they had his retainer showed up within a week was a pleasant surprise that stirred his ninja curiosity. As he left a staff of clones in charge of the office, he resolved to find out how they managed to raise that much gold so quickly.

(A/N Spoon 1)

I'M BACK! Okay, so John and I haven't had a chance to actually see each other the past few days, so John told me to just write the title and A/Ns and post this chapter myself. And look! An actual matching title this time!

(A/N Spoon 2)

John will undoubtedly correct me if I'm wrong but this chapter's been planned for a while. Either way, it's a favorite of mine.

(A/N Spoon 3)

And no, Hari didn't TECHNICALLY teach Sprinkles how to magic, but he did drag the dog everywhere, which means Sirius sat in on all his wandless magic lessons and picked up a few things.

(A/N Spoon 4)

As for the outtake this time. No one really thought Manipulative Dumbles would willingly let his ace go without controlling spells on him, right? To be fair he did, but not by choice, and it probably won't be the last time he tries dragging Hari under his

thumb. That should be fun. Also, a challenge. Anyone want to guess how Dumbledore got the money so fast?

Skirting the Edge of Safety

Chapter 53: Skirting the Edge of Safety

Dumbledore rubbed his face with his hands and called for his personal House Elf to bring him some of Severus's coffee. It was a sign of just how worn out he was that he was willing to ingest a substance he suspected was actually more amphetamine than caffeine. When the mug arrived (specially reinforced) Fawkes let a few tears fall into it, just in case.

For the last forty-eight hours, Dumbledore had been working out the logistics of trying to get Sirius Black cleared of charges. Despite his considerable influence, he had been unable to manage it. There were too many people who would be hurt too badly by that revelation for them to willingly reopen the matter. On the upside, he had also sent a pair of letters to the Queen; one was by owl (the other he had decided he preferred to remain ignorant on the details of, since Hari had offered to ensure delivery). The reply he had received had mostly been heartening (although the questions about why he was leaving letters on her pillow and how he had done it were not letting him sleep more soundly). From what he understood-mostly through his spies in the Ministry-Madam Bones had been quietly contacted by her pen pal and was beginning to quietly launch an investigation.

Dumbledore was aware that he had quite possibly set in motion a massive series of dominoes, that he might have begun a chaotic breakup of the Ministry that could have devastating unforeseen consequences. He also didn't care. If he had been able to foresee some objective that might be obtained by the continuation of Sirius Black as a fugitive (although that was a serious stretching of the term), he would have done so without hesitation, innocent or not. But without a good reason, the potential damage of freeing the man was not a valid reason to leave him thought a criminal (although given a few incidents in his Hogwarts years, a convincing argument could be

made on that point...) and so damn them to hell, he would do what he could to ensure that the man was freed.

It was his current estimation that the end result of Madam Bones's investigation would be the reversing of charges against one Sirius Black and a warrant issued for Peter Pettigrew for what good it would do. That would probably be done by the end of the school year, possibly sooner if Madam Bones was particularly interested in the task. Maybe not, though. If she were cautious and careful-everything he knew about her said she was-then it might well be more than a year to sort it out. Whose head would end up on the chopping block for the cock up would be a more interesting matter. If Madam Bones did things the way he expected, it would come as something of an unpleasant shock when she convened the tribunal, so the ass-covering would be somewhat limited by the inability to further fabricate evidence.

The question became one of personalities. Those who were paranoid or long-term thinkers would probably have already taken steps over the years to distance themselves from anything that might be questionable. Whether they had realized that the Black arrest was one of them was, again, another matter. He would assume that after Barty Crouch's fall, the man had used whatever clout he had left to destroy anything potentially incriminating, but the Black arrest had looked pretty solid until two days ago. Fudge wouldn't be worried since this had all happened under his predecessor and he had been a minor functionary at the time. It could be assumed that at least one of the Aurors on the ground at the scene would get the ax, just so someone could be blamed for not following procedure. After that... Dumbledore had resolved to sit this one out if he could help it. He wanted to have nothing seem tainted by his involvement and very few of his people could get touched by this mess anyway. He'd like to think they would have sorted this out better, but he knew that in those hectic days after the death of Voldemort, things were too chaotic to think that anyone would have looked deeper into things when it had looked so good.

His eyes bugged out as the coffee hit his system. Well, he definitely felt awake now. That was something, anyways. He blinked a few times and realized that it happened so fast that he didn't actually see the darkness behind his eyelids. That was less good.

With his new energy, he attacked the paperwork that had accrued over the last few days.

X

X

Remus Lupin walked into the classroom and found that his least favorite class was present. The Third Years with Hari Potter were definitely tied with the NEWT students for most terrible, but they edged it out by virtue of being so much younger. And having the son of his dear friend being a murderous little hellion.

He grinned anyway, knowing that at this moment, Sirius was probably on his way back out of Gringotts' and would be heading straight to the nearest brothel. Actually, no, first he'd hit an apothecary.

X

X

Sirius Black blinked. "Nymphadora?"

The woman scowled at him and her wand began to glow green. "You're still technically a wanted criminal."

"I am?" Sirius asked. "Based on my experience in the bank just now, I think that I am the head of the Black family-your family, incidentally-and am in no way connected to the arch-criminal Sirius Black, since he's safely in Azkaban. *Nymphadora* ." He grinned when her wand twitched.

"I really hate you, cousin."

"No you don't."

She sighed. "You're right. Mom was devastated when you turned out to be evil." When he opened his mouth she went on, "more evil than she'd thought." His mouth shut. "It will be good to have you back so I can properly hex away your ability to enjoy procreation."

"On that cheerful note," Sirius hefted his package of potions. "I have places to be, so..."

"Yes," Tonks said cheerfully. "Madam Bones's not-office, I know."

"No that's not..." Sirius blinked. "You're taking me to see Madam Bones?"

"Yes."

"Madam *Amelia* Bones?"

"That would be the one, yes."

"And you waited until after I had been through the apothecary's?"

"No, that's just when I caught up with you."

"HOT DAMN!" Sirius crowed. "I knew Amelia was just playing hard to get!"

Tonks blinked slowly. She should probably correct him in order to avoid any mistakes. On the other hand, the man had used her given name, so she didn't really care right now. "I bow before your superior knowledge of the female mind," she said drily.

X

X

Junior Auror Nymphadora Tonks listened to the loud bangs from inside the theoretically silenced office with interest as she read a

copy of the *Daily Profit*. She had apparently impressed the boss enough that she was trusted with a mission that was so secret that it was not, technically, a mission at all. It was more like she had been asked to go out to Diagon and if she happened to bump into a given person, to please direct that someone to a small office that had no official value whatsoever and then, if she had some spare time, sit around outside and discourage anyone who might decide to take an interest. This was her day off, in fact.

She mused over the article accusing Lockhart of another kidnap, this time taking a woman from her fiancé amid much fanfare (and she was beginning to suspect that this was because the *Prophet* couldn't differentiate between fireworks and gunfire) and, also, a small armored vehicle made from a horse and buggy. Given her upbringing, she didn't really trust the reporting in the paper, but it was still the only magical news source, so she had to just try and work out what was really happening. In the case of the Lockhart stories, she was getting more and more confused as she tried to work out the facts.

The sounds eventually died down and whatever clandestine activities were intended began. Her eye was drawn to a boy in a black robe with red clouds wandering through the street across the way. It wasn't that he was taking an interest, he very much wasn't, it was just that she caught the flash of color. And something seemed very familiar about that cloak. The boy gave her a polite smile and small wave as he continued along into a shop that, had she been in her official capacity, she would probably have questioned him simply on the basis of entering.

Tonks was just beginning to wonder if she might want to go over there and check that he was okay when he emerged with a small smile, gave her another wave, and continued onwards towards Knockturn, with a quiet confidence she had seen veteran Aurors lack when going there. Was the kid a vampire? Nah, it wasn't even a little overcast. She chalked it up to what she'd been told by her trainers would be the answer sometimes: shit happens.

X

X

"Pansy?"

The girl in question turned very, very slowly towards her friend and instructor in an ever increasing number of ways to maim and kill.

"Yes, Hari?"

"Why aren't you wearing your gun?"

"I'm wearing a skirt."

"And?"

"Well, I tried, and I couldn't draw it, so..."

"I see." Hari nodded in a way that made Pansy very nervous.

Her anxiety only grew when there were no repercussions during her nightly shooting practice. Despite her best efforts to convince him otherwise, he had insisted she continue using the large gun and kept drilling her on how to use it properly. They had yet to move on from a static stance, but she already knew from Defense that he demanded perfection.

X

X

Pansy woke the next morning, sadly used to only getting two hours of sleep-something that Daphne and Hermione assured her was a habit that didn't get lost once Hari engrained it in one's head-and eventually managed to complete her morning ablutions. It was when she went to dress that she realized what was wrong.

"Hari!"

The entire Common Room looked up at Pansy, wearing her dressing gown. Hari was, surprisingly, present and making notes on his sprawling array-project that had begun to take over the entire south-eastern corner of the room (no one dared ask him to clean it up).

"Yes?"

"Care to explain?" She held up a skirt. It had been a flared, black garment cut to the knees. It was still that, but it now had a slit all the way up the right side to the waist.

"Why do you think Hari did that?" asked Blaise, curiously.

"You refused the shoulder-holster," said Hari. "And you can't really wear a waist-holster with skirts, so you need to be able to draw from something on your thigh; now you can."

Pansy blinked. "You destroyed all my clothes!"

"To help keep you safe."

She gaped at him. "My parents will *kill* me if I come home wearing these!"

"Even more reason you need to reach your gun."

Pansy closed her eyes, muttering.

"Maybe you could try the shoulder-holster over the summer?" suggested Daphne, not entirely sure what that was, but hoping to defuse the situation.

"I don't think my parents would approve."

"Tell you what," said Tracy. "I'll talk to my mom, see what she suggests."

Pansy gave her a weak smile. "Thanks."

"Don't forget your holster," said Hari.

Blaise raised a finger. "Pansy?"

"Yes?"

"Just something to consider?"

"What?"

"You're a Pureblood, right?"

"Yes. I think that's well established. Why?"

"Um... I'm not sure how to put this. Er..." Blaise flushed for a moment. "You probably wear modest... underthings, right?" The look she gave him was scathing. "Well, with that cut to the skirt..."

Pansy went bright red.

The girls looked at each other. Hermione glanced over at Blaise, who gave her a sort of half-shrug. "If I had to suggest someone to talk to... you could try the Head Girl. She's a half-blood. Or one of the Seventh Year Hufflepuffs, two of the girls are Muggleborn. They can probably get you some catalogues."

"For that suggestion," hissed Pansy. "You get to do it. And make sure they get express delivery. Today is Saturday; I plan to be able to leave the Common Room for classes."

"Okay." Blaise rose and trotted out.

(A/N John)

I'm ba~ack!

(A/N 2 John)

So, it took a little longer than I wanted to get this one out because the next chapter I was typing turned out to be a big 'un.

So I have to break that up into two. Joy.

(A/N 3 John)

This was definitely a fun chapter for me. Some bits and pieces of things just started to happen and they were amusing. Pansy learning to shoot hadn't been in my original thought process, but once she was learning, it was inevitable that Hari would ensure she carried her weapon at all times.

(A/N 4 John)

And yes, things will still get crazier. Not necessarily more off-the-rails, but definitely a bit more along the new rails.

(A/N 5 John)

Also, enjoy the Outtake.

X

X

==OUTTAKE==

Itachi looked at the letter in his hand. He had been in the middle of a meeting with the Akatsuki. The flame peacock had dropped it into his hands and he had decided to tune out Sasori's ramblings to find out what was happening with his son.

Pein didn't bother glaring until Itachi's eyes had widened in shock and he was not only staring at a letter instead of paying attention, but also open-mouthed. "Share with the class, Itachi?" he prompted.

Itachi looked at Tobi, Sasori, Kisame, Konan, and Pein. "Hari just sent me word of a new job he got."

"Yeah?"

"It's a protection detail."

Kisame's eyes nearly had Ryo-signs in them. "How much?"

"The better question is 'how long'," Itachi replied. "The answer is a minimum of three years."

Tobi fell out of his seat.

"How much," repeated Kisame. When Itachi handed him the letter he nearly dropped it. "Holy fuck."

"No," Itachi said slowly. "Look further down."

Kisame paled as much as a blue fish-man could. "That's his *monthly rate*?"

Itachi nodded. "We're never telling Kakuzu about this."

A Long Time Coming

Chapter 54: A Long Time Coming.

Blaise returned an hour later with a stack of magazines. He held them out to Pansy, "for you, my lady," he said.

She snatched them up and went bright red. "Thi... thi... people wear these?"

"According to mom? Yes." Blaise paused. "Well, for a short time, anyway."

Hari cocked his head. "What do you mean 'for a short time'?" he asked.

Blaise coughed. "I probably should have put that one on the bottom, try one of the others."

"That's not much better!" Pansy was giving a decent impression of someone with no blood below her neck.

The other girls gathered around her (except for Hermione, who had a pretty good idea of what it was. Or, rather, enough of an idea to not want an idea) and all turned as red as Pansy.

"Isn't this uncomfortable?" asked Millie as she pointed to one of the pictures.

Blaise craned his neck to see over their shoulders. "Yes. I don't speak from personal experience," he added hurriedly, "but my mother says that they are. She usually adds 'and so worth it'."

Millicent and Tracy looked at each other. Tracy was the one to speak. "Blaise?"

"Yeah?"

"How would we go about placing an order?"

"Dunno. Try asking Gertrude Rittersdotr; I got the catalogues from her." He watched as the two of them scrambled out of the Common Room. "I'm not going to ask." He sat down beside Pansy. "Given your skirts..." he took one of the catalogues and began to flip through it. "You'll need to stick with this style."

Pansy's eyes bugged out. "Th... tha..."

"I'm thinking you'll want to skip the lacy ones." Blaise began to scribble a few item numbers.

Hari continued his labors unaware of the mortified glare Pansy sent his way.

X

X

Severus Snape took a sip of coffee, looked up, noted the change in scenery and went back to his beverage. Then his eyes bugged out and sulfurous fluid sprayed through the air. The table immediately began to smoke and blacken and his own robes smoldered gently despite their advanced protections against chemical damage.

Walking into the Great Hall was Pansy Parkinson, scion of just about the purest of the Pureblood houses and she wore a skirt with a slit up the right side of her leg reaching her waist, to a chorus of catcalls and whistles. Her pale cheeks were marred by a blush, but her face had a stony set to it.

Remus Lupin leaned over to Snape. "Aren't your students getting started a bit young?" he asked.

"What I want to know is what Potter did and why."

"How come you assume it's his fault?"

"In his defense," offered Dumbledore, who hadn't yet noticed the disturbance and was busily cutting his toast up, "it usually is."

Snape had just begun to try and get a grip on his shifting reality when someone's catcall was apparently too lewd (thankfully he hadn't heard it) or was just the last straw and he saw *Pansy Parkinson* draw a semiautomatic pistol from a holster on her thigh and fire it once into the air.

"Now that I have your attention," her voice rang through the Hall with the calm poise of the well bred. "I am not amused and I have been practicing my shooting with Professor Potter." The Hall went silent. "Thank you." She walked over and sat down to glare at Hari, who didn't even look up.

"Someone should talk to her about her attire," mumbled Snape.

"Like her Head of House?" prompted Lupin.

The two were far from friends, but they had discovered that both had a similar view of humanity and a similarly dry, even acerbic humor (although Lupin was still getting his bearings to display it properly). Besides, it had the comfort of familiarity to snipe at each other, even if it was less mean spirited (it seemed that Snape was over his fear of werewolves for some reason).

"Like hell. I am *not* having a discussion with a thirteen-year-old girl in my charge because I think her garb is indecent! There are just so many ways that could be misconstrued." Snape rubbed his eyes. "People dislike me enough for my real faults, I see no reason to give them some imaginary ones to add to the list. Maybe you should do it?"

Lupin looked at the Fifth Year girls who waved shyly at him. He was discovering that the werewolf thing was now making him seem more like a tortured soul than a terrible monster with Professor Potter in the area. "I have my own problems, thank you. I don't need to give

anyone the impression that I pay that kind of attention to my students' clothes."

"Agreed. Besides," Snape added absently, watching as Pansy pulled her gun on someone who had taken the last of the scrambled eggs, "she seems in a bad mood and overly willing to use that weapon. Professor Potter!"

When Hari trotted up, Snape motioned him closer. "Please have a word with your student." Hari's mouth opened. "The one you're teaching to shoot." Hari's mouth closed. "About proper use of firearms."

Hari cocked his head to the side.

"I will be *most* displeased if I find out she is using her weapons for anything other than defense. And things like demanding someone leave the last pork chop is *not* defense." Snape glared. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Let me put it more simply: tell her to stop pointing it at anyone not trying to actively kill her."

"Yes, Professor."

"In fact, mention that she should exercise the judgement that *I* would use rather than what she learns from you regarding it."

"Yes, Professor."

"I hope that was sufficiently clear."

"Yes, Professor."

"Tell her promptly."

"Yes, Professor."

"That means go do it right now."

"Yes, Professor."

"Now go away."

"Yes, Professor."

X

X

"Did you notice?" hissed Tracy.

"Notice what?" Daphne sounded bored. The girls were sitting in the Library, working on Arithmancy homework. In theory, Hari should have been there, but he had stopped doing class-related work weeks ago and seemed to spend his time wandering off to talk to Tam.

"Hari."

Daphne motioned to her to continue.

"When Pansy walked in," Tracy said. When there was no response, she elaborated, "he didn't seem interested."

Pansy glowered. "I'm not sure whether I should be glad or insulted."

Millie shrugged, already aware that she was unlikely to ever have those concerns. "I don't know if he pays attention to anyone."

Tracy pouted a little. "Maybe he really *is* gay?"

"I said 'anyone', Tracy," Millie replied. "Male or female."

"Huh." Pansy cocked her head to the side. "That's... interesting."

Daphne twitched in instinctive worry.

X

X

Hermione sat in the girl's dormitory. Slytherin took certain precautions as the students got older, moving the females into group rooms despite the desire for privacy was considered prudent to ensure that no one pressed a suit too thoroughly. Despite the males being left to their private rooms, the policy was a demonstration of the combination of paranoia and back-stabbing traditional in the house and the awareness of how certain persons could react. The fact that the boys were not able to get into the girl's wing was considered a minor detail and there had yet to be a Head of House who had changed the policy if only because the risk of being wrong was too great to gamble. The current Head of House did not consider Hari's inability to notice such wards as evidence of wisdom and just chalked it up to it being Hari, but that didn't change his position on the matter. Double standards happened and in this case, the theory ran that *hopefully* the young women would have a choice about going into the male wing, but at least this way attacks in sleep would be reduced by possible witnesses.

This meant that she now shared a dorm room with her year-mates. The rule in Slytherin had always been to abuse anyone who didn't fit in at this point, but with the changing winds, the prevailing standard was now that there was an invisible line around each girl's area and no one made catty comments about someone else's space. Professor Snape, who (being paranoid even to Slytherin thinking) kept his ear to the ground, approved of this new system as being more conducive to studying and not ignoring it if one's dorm-mate was being raped by fostering a sense of community (ironically caused by *not* sharing). He was hoping, anyways.

The upshot of this was her current predicament and her abject humiliation while her room-mates snickered at her-not meanly, but it was impossible not to laugh a little while she held up the current object of discussion and finished retelling her recent experience.

X

X

Hari was sitting in his room, working on a runic scheme being slowly etched into a pen by use of a small needle. He didn't look up when Hermione entered, nor when she sat down on the bed beside him. He didn't say anything either, apparently unaware of her presence.

"Hari?" it wasn't the breathy tone she'd hoped it would be in her still developing body, but it sounded like a poor approximation to her ears. "Can you help me?"

"What with, Hermione?" he asked without turning.

She frowned for a moment before smoothing her features into what she hoped was a seductive glance. "Would you look at me for a moment?"

"I am."

It took a longer moment before she recovered her poise. "Turn please?"

Hari did.

He had already seen it, so there was no shock on his face at the sight of her wearing a blouse with several buttons undone and one of Pansy's skirts, rolled up to shorten the otherwise modest length. He didn't react to the slight flush to her features or skin either and just waited blank-faced.

"I..." Hermione drew on her reading of the books her mother thought she didn't know were stashed behind false covers displaying titles like 'Annals of the Great Accountants Vol. III'. "I feel so hot. C... can you help me? Please? I need you." Her voice squeaked a bit and was not in any real way sultry, but it was a good attempt for a girl just turned fourteen.

Hari conjured a paper fan and offered it to her.

It took a great deal of control not to scowl. Instead she felt herself flush for real now and tried again, drawing in a deep breath in the hopes of also drawing attention to a bust line that was still in the process of developing into something noticeable. "No. I... I need... you ."

Hari had narrowed his eyes for a moment and then cocked his head apparently trying to remember something. It appeared that a memory waved a card in his head because he nodded with a small smile. A plastic dildo appeared in his hands, dwarfing Hermione's youthful imaginings and yet also looking nothing like she had envisioned (and not only because it was purple). He held it out to her.

Her blush deepened, mixed with a degree of shame and self-loathing and humiliation as she accepted slowly. She was about to rise and flee when he spoke. "Wait a moment." She froze, half vindicated and half deer-in-the-headlights. He tapped the object in her hand and it began to vibrate gently. "You can speed it up by tapping it with your index finger," he said and turned back to his runes.

Hermione stared at his offering for a moment and ran, not sure if she was relieved or ashamed and insulted.

X

X

"And that's it." Hermione was happy to be wearing a buttoned blouse and normal skirt again. She took a certain vindictive pleasure in the fact that Pansy was stuck with the modified type at the moment, just as a petty bit of revenge.

"No interest at all ?" asked Tracy. "Wow. That's freaky."

"What?" Pansy and Hermione both seemed a bit shocked.

"Haven't you noticed some of the boys a year younger than us staring?" She pretended to preen.

"Not really," said Hermione.

"People don't stare much thanks to this," Pansy patted the Colt at her side.

"They do," Millie commented, leaning back in her bed. She knew that she could likely have kept her own room despite Slytherin policy, but wasn't really interested in accepting that reality yet. "Just not when you're looking."

Pansy frowned. "Oh."

X

X

Blaise walked into the Common Room sporting a bruise. "Hermione."

She didn't look up from the book (and notebook) in her lap. "What?" Her tone was short and made it clear that she didn't appreciate someone interrupting her study-time since Hari was no-doubt going to bother her later.

"So I had an interesting harangue."

"I don't think that was a sentence."

"Regardless. Look at me for a moment."

Hermione glanced up. "Blaise! What happened?"

"Well, apparently word got around that I was collecting lingerie catalogues for Pansy."

"And someone thought you were a budding pervert?"

Blaise gave a half smile and then winced. "No, no. Good guess though. That's what I had been expecting. Instead, I was shouted at for an hour because I'm cheating on you."

"You're what?"

"That's what I'm told." Blaise gave a playful frown. "I'm shocked at your behavior, Hermione. Not telling me we're dating."

Hermione stared at him in confusion.

"Considering I got slapped, I certainly hope it was for a good reason."

"They slapped you?"

"Mhmm."

"For... *cheating* on me?"

"So I'm told. At length. I hope to one day have my hearing back in my left ear."

"Uhh..."

"Well, I will be a gentleman about this." Blaise bowed slightly. "I apologize for cheating on you with Pansy." There was a squawk of indignant outrage from the girl, who was sitting nearer the fireplace as the autumnal chill had begun its usual infiltration of the dungeon and she was in a somewhat skin-revealing skirt.

"Umm..."

"Please accept my heartfelt apology, Hermione."

"Okay?"

Blaise smiled. Then stopped smiling. "Well?"

Hermione looked confused. "Well what?"

"Aren't you going to apologize to me?"

"What for?"

"For cheating on me by trying to seduce Hari."

Hermione blinked. Then her face went scarlet with fury and embarrassment. "HE TOLD YOU?" she shrieked. "I'LL KILL HIM!" She slammed her book shut and rose.

"You know," Blaise said. "If you were really in need of... relief... I would have helped my girlfriend." Draco Malfoy had already dived for cover, so the book slammed into the chair he hid behind as it flew passed Blaise's face. "I promise to be gentle if it's your first time." He watched as Hermione stormed out. "I'll take that to be a 'no', then?"

Tracy snickered. "Wow... maybe you'd have had a better chance at seducing Hari?" The rest of the Common Room was listening with interest. The only person not present was Hari, who had wandered off with his dog for even less apparent reason than usual.

"Maybe. But my mother is going to be happy; I plan to give her grandchildren. Lots of them." He grinned.

"You know," said Tracy. "My dad told me about this dark ritual..."

"The normal way," Blaise elaborated. "With great skill, too." Tracy blinked when Blaise gave her a roguish grin. "Want to practice?"

Tracy went bright red.

"Now I know why my mother does that," said Blaise, laughing. "That's fun." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively at the redhead. "My mother made sure I read up, even gave me pointers. I promise it'll be the ride of your life." He watched Tracy flee the room. "Something I said?" he asked Millie, who was grinning broadly.

X

X

==OUT TAKE==

"Tell me what?" asked Kakuzu as he entered the room.

"If we told you," replied Pein, "we wouldn't be not telling you."

"Not telling me what, exactly?"

"You seem to be having a hard time with this."

"No. I just want to know."

"We're not telling you."

"I hardly see how that's relevant."

"Aside from being the crux of the matter, I guess not."

"So you'll tell me?"

"Kakuzu?"

"Yes?"

"Go take Hidan and blow up some stuff in Cloud or something. Maybe kill an elite jonin or something."

"Will you tell me what it is if I do?"

"Out." Pein decided to press the matter by using the Heavenly Gaze of the Omnipresent god to send the giant figure flying out the wall.

(A/N John)

So the scene with Hermione has been in the plan for this fic nearly from the beginning. It's possibly one of the oldest planned bits we had.

(A/N 2 John)

On the other hand, the stuff with Pansy has been entirely spur-of-the-moment stuff. It was intended to just be a little one-off scene and, like many of my scenes in that style, has taken on a horrible life of its own that it having far-reaching repercussions in the plans for later years.

(A/N 3 John)

I'd like to say that this is the craziest it gets, but I'd be lying.

(A/N 4 John)

All I will say is that Hari has developed a knack for doing tremendous damage to the world by trying to be helpful. The problem is that he doesn't always get the joke.

(A/N 5 John)

That will make more sense in the future. Right now, it's just an ominous intimation of things to come. Woooooo!

(A/N 6 John)

Please imagine that was an eerie ghost-noise.

(A/N 7 John)

I really hope Spoon doesn't end up choking on her dinner or spitting it up on my shoulder as she reads this over it.

Gifts With Consequences

Chapter 55: Gifts With Consequences

"So, Hari." Pansy was using her 'reminding Hari of the real world' tone. "I realize that I should have mentioned this earlier, but Christmas break starts today. The rest of us are going to be going home to our families." She paused and looked down a list in front of her. "And all of our families have *not* invited you to visit."

"Mm?" Hari had several small tools held in his mouth while he etched something on a tiny piece of rock.

"I thought it might be nice to let you know that you're not welcome. And to explain why we're not going to be around for a bit."

"Mm."

Pansy turned to the others, who were watching with a certain amount of amusement from another part of the Common Room.

X

X

Hari walked into the Great Hall and frowned, walking over to the Head Table. "Professor Headmaster?"

"Yes?"

"Just letting you know I'm going to be going on a short field trip."

"Not to worry."

Lupin blinked. This was absolutely surreal.

X

X

Hari opened the scroll his clones had delivered to him and began to make final preparations. Two clones were already detailed to run their way to Argentina because someone had a job to do, but Hari had understood from context that Christmas was supposed to be spent with friends, so he was going to do that. His *clones* on the other hand... well, someone would be spending Christmas with their ancestors.

A bunch of vinyl lay scattered about and he had small piles of sulfur in one corner. He was working in one of the many scattered dungeon sections he had claimed for his purposes. His current focus was a tiny etching he was trying to complete and was having to go carefully because of the scale he was working on and the complexity of the scheme.

X

X

"Hey Tracy!"

The redhead girl didn't even turn, let alone jump in shock. She continued eating her cereal, although she *had* ducked her father's spray of milk when the boy appeared in a bloom of flame. Instead, she chewed, swallowed, then spoke. "Good morning, Hari."

"How're you?"

"Not bad, not bad. My mom is still over the moon about those rifles you got her."

"Why is she asleep still?" Hari focused for a moment. "She looks pretty worn out."

"How would you know?" asked Tracy's father in suspicion.

"Huh. Congratulations, Tracy."

"About what?"

"You're going to be a big sister."

Tracy ducked under more milk. "I am?"

"I think it must be pretty recent." Hari pulled a small box from behind his back and dropped it into Tracy's stunned hands. "Here you go! I have some stops to make still."

Tracy watched the boy vanish in a cloud of fire and looked at her father, who was looking a little green. It was at that moment that Clare walked into the kitchen. "I missed Hari, didn't I?" she asked when she saw the small box her daughter still clutched.

Tracy nodded silently.

Clare poured herself a morning egg nog and was about to take a sip when it sailed from her hands to her husband. Her eyes narrowed. "You had better have a good reason for that," she growled.

There was a bloom of flame and Hari was standing beside a crib, stroller, pile of stuffed critters, diapers and bottles, and a small, jeweled pacifier with a suspiciously British coat of arms on it. He gave Clare a big smile. "Congratulations!" Then he was gone.

Clare blinked for a moment and then collapsed in a dead faint.

X

X

Tam had no practical experience with how Hari handled the celebration of Christmas, but her... friends (and wasn't that a new and interesting term to use for people around her?) had taken it upon themselves to warn her of the details while on the train home. She was not exactly a Weasley, but she got the general idea, so she had promptly informed her body's kinfolk. Fred and Forge had been sad to realize that they wouldn't be pranking anyone, because Professor

Potter would expect more serious traps and they weren't keen to do that to their family. Percy was mostly indifferent. His life had become much more interesting since the introduction of Professor Potter to it, but he nevertheless was a comparatively stoic member of the Weasleys-not laid back or relaxed, merely that he was better self-possessed and controlled than others. Ron was curious, but that was because he was currently in his smart-cycle and so wished to observe Professor Potter in an unfamiliar environment.

The upshot of all of this, though, was that when Hari appeared, he was surprised to find himself wrapped in a fierce hug and dragged to a table so laden with food that he expected it to collapse. It took him several stunned moments to register that someone other than his father or Uncles had successfully grappled him and so he stared into space, trying to catch up with the world.

The woman burbled on and on about friends and eating. He wasn't able to fathom food at the moment, too distracted by this development, but the fat-dripping stuff piled high in front of him was unappetizing regardless. The proffered plate, also stacked with servings most gluttons considered excessive, was duly ignored while he examined what had just happened. All around him was a quiet, cheerful buzz of conversation and a general feeling of wellbeing that he wasn't entirely able to ignore.

A further look at the fat woman provided the knowledge that she was no fighter, had no skill in arms-her movements were too clumsy and ill-thought for that. No economy of movement that even someone who didn't need to preserve strength adopted as he grew in skill. On the other hand, she clearly had not a single evil impulse in her-aside from being a great threat to various livestock and agricultural products (and possibly to his stomach if he ate this stuff)-and her complete lack of anything resembling an intent to harm or even mildly annoy was why he hadn't sensed her attack. With the matter settled in his mind, he turned to Tam.

"Normally, this would be the place where I give you a gift," he said.
"But since I am training you, I give you a reminder to practice more

since success is a reward all its own." He paused. "But I might also have a few new rune schemes for you to check out when you get back to school." Something unnatural prompted him to add, "good bye," to the table in general before vanishing.

Tam blinked. Somehow, the involvement of Hari Potter in her first real Christmas wasn't incongruous and just felt natural. That was probably a bad thing.

X

X

Pansy didn't look up from her food when her parents began to swear. It didn't seem worth checking when she knew that it had to be Hari. No one else could so instantly bring her progenitors from coldly distant upper-class to longshoreman and dockside trull. Besides, the pudding was quite nice and best eaten warm. She chose to ignore the impressive array of foul language being levelled at her friend before going silent—which she hoped was just magic rather than death, but resolved to stay her course.

When she finally paid attention to the world at large, she found that her friend had silenced the two adults and was eating a small bowl of rice that had been provided to him by an effusively polite House Elf—whom she knew her parents had ordered to be rude to Hari (and to poison the food, but she privately expected that to be considered flavoring at best).

"Hello, Hari." Pansy put on a show of at least mildly icy dislike to appease her infuriated parents who were sitting at the head of their table, glaring at someone who had once again invaded their home.

"Hey Pansy." He finished his food and smiled in a satisfied way. "I just had the strangest experience when I was at the Weasley's lunch table." The name of the blood-traitors did nothing to make her parents calm. "I think I might have been hugged."

Pansy blinked. "You're not sure?"

"Well... I thought that Tam's not-mom was grappling me and that I had somehow missed her attack, but she didn't seem to mean harm even passively and she tried to feed me... so it's possible."

"I... see..." Pansy wondered if this was what it was like being Daphne sometimes. Or Professor Snape.

"Anyway, I wanted to make sure you got your gift."

"Just like always."

"Yep. So I made it for you." He held out a small box with raised buttons on the side. "It has music already on it." He vanished.

Pansy idly pressed the Play button. *NWA* began to blast out at concert volume.

X

X

Millie watched as her mother's attempt at an ambush resulted in her flying across the living room and through the wall, destroying the fireplace and part of a structural wall in the process.

"Oh good," Hari said. He was looking at his extended fist with an air of casual observation. "That still works." He walked over to the hole in the wall and watched with polite interest as his friend's mother dug herself out of the rubble. He was impressed that she managed to not reveal anything despite wearing a short, tight cocktail dress. Well, to anyone without his eye.

When she charged at him, he absently dodged the real attack, ignoring the feint without effort. He ended up grabbing her by the neck and slamming her face through another part of the outer wall, leaving it there while he turned to Millie. "I made this for you."

She took the box with a certain amount of trepidation and then fell backwards as her mother's flying tackle slammed through the space Hari had occupied and bore her to the ground.

"Oooh!" said the not-giantess as she spotted the box. "What did the cutie get you this time?"

Millie opened the box. "I think he's getting forgetful," she commented as she put on the brass knuckles. Sparks crackled around them. "Or maybe he's just thoughtful." Her fist struck her mother, who had been staring in fascination. When her mother skidded backwards, she looked down at her hand in, well, shock.

"Merlin's mutilated scrotum!" her mother snarled. "That hurt like a bitch!" Then Millie's world went black.

X

X

"Hello Hari." Hermione, like Pansy, didn't look up. Her occasion for non-attention was hearing her father choking on his gin and tonic (it was early for that, but she had pointed out that Hari was probably coming by). She was enjoying her book and would wait and see how long Hari would allow her to continue reading. She was enjoying the collected works of Winston Churchill as given to her by Hari. She hadn't exactly gotten over the fact that he had stolen the texts, but was willing to forego her concerns in order to read them. The margin notes the man had made were... enlightening.

"Hey Hermione." Hari sat down on the armchair that her father had vacated (he was now lying on the ground, hands around his throat and turning slightly blue). "How's your vacation been?"

"Interesting," she replied. She pointed a finger at her father and the liquid expelled itself from his lungs out his nose. "I've been working on reading this book when you're not bothering me."

"Your homework..."

"Finished on the train back." She blushed, in as much as could be seen behind the book, "I had been busy so I didn't look until then."

"Well, I have a gift for you."

"Is it stolen?"

"No." It certainly wasn't, too. Ninja didn't really *steal* per se; liberating goods from those unable to maintain possession was just standard business practice.

Hermione didn't look up as she accepted the wrapped package. It was only an inch thick, but rather large otherwise. Without thinking about it, she cast a wandless featherweight charm to address the matter and set it beside her seat. "Thanks. Your gift is in the owl." She stopped and frowned. "Mail, anyway. It's not inside the owl. Please don't cut open a feathery creature looking for things." She peaked around her book. "Oh, he's gone."

She undid the paper and blinked. In front of her were a set of late Nineteenth-Century submarine plans. "Oh no."

X

X

"Hello Girl-Tobi." Hari stepped to the side and there was a crash as the blonde slammed into a cabinet and knocked several glass knickknacks to the ground, where they shattered. "Good morning, Daphne."

The black-haired girl was watching the scene with a certain amount of amusement as her sister attempted to get close to Hari a second time and bowled into a divan, which toppled, sending her sprawling.

"Merry Christmas," offered her father from his seat at the kitchen table. He was slowly getting used to the semi-annual invasion of his

home by a strange boy who would spend a short time there and, upon leaving, upset the world again. He ran a hand through his blond hair, slicked back against his skull, and considered. "Would you care for a bit of breakfast?" He knew his wife would offer anyway if the boy stayed. He loved her dearly, but she was a bit chipper sometimes.

Hari leaned out of the way of Daphne's mother as she attempted to use an arm to encircle his shoulder and guide him to the table. "We asked Daphne and she had us have the House Elves make you some things you might like." She pointed to the broth with a piece of sliced, grilled beef in it.

"I suppose I could have a bite to eat," Hari said after a moment. His initial assessment was that the House Elves had been studying with the ones from Hogwarts, since the ramen was quite good... well, sort of. Technically it wasn't ramen because someone had forgotten to add the noodles, but it was pretty good anyway.

"So, how are those you've already visited?" asked Daphne. "I assume we are not so unfortunate as to be the first on the list?"

"No, technically I'm visiting Girl-Tobi now. I'm going to visit you next."

"What?"

"I've been going in reverse-alphabetical order..."

"But her name is Astoria."

"Whose name is?" asked Hari, head cocked in confusion.

"My sister." Daphne's tone could have easily chilled a bottle of firewhiskey.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" Hari demanded. Girl-Tobi was running in circles outside, burning off energy from her early consumption of excessive candy canes. Daphne's mouth opened. "Here." Hari

shoved a box into Daphne's hands. "I guess I'm visiting you. Bye, Daphne."

Daphne looked down at the box. It had holes in it. "I'm not sure if I hope he pranked me again or not," she mused. Just to be safe, she levitated the box into the middle of the living room and used magic to open it.

From inside tumbled a small, spotted kitten.

Daphne blinked. "I... this is somewhat unexpected." Then the kitten mewed and then coughed and a green cloud blew from its maw and the carpet began to grey. "Oh."

"KITTY!" Before Daphne could say anything, her sister had begun to snuggle the small fluff ball, diving right into the noxious vapors to do so. She watched in confusion as her sister failed to die.

"Mum? Dad?" she called. "I think Hari got me a nundu."

"He what?" her father's voice was the same flat tone she often used when dealing with some aberration of Hari's.

"Yeah. And Astoria seems to be immune to it."

"That's not possible."

"And yet it seems to be happening," Daphne closed her eyes.

"Where's Hari?" asked Astoria, holding the kitten.

"Daphne said something to him and he left," her mother replied.

Astoria's one visible eye began to water and she began to sniffle. "Why would you do that?" she managed. Then she looked more angry (well, her one eye did) and Daphne was already dodging as the sobbing, screeching Astoria Greengrass began to hurl parts of the living room furniture at her sister, who made for the French doors outside where she might be able to have more room.

X

X

==Out takE==

"Hello, other Professor Headmaster." Dumbledore's hand had whipped out his wand and was pointing it at a space that was conspicuously empty of anyone. "You seem jumpy. Have there been any threats against the principal recently?" He finally spotted the figure of his extortionist hero sitting in the chair across from him, feet resting on his desk.

"Aside from the right-hand man of the dark lord I'm concerned about running around trying to kill your principal? No." Dumbledore scowled. "He's already been spotted inside the castle at least twice, making attempts to harm him." The elderly man blinked. "Why do you have a dog with you?"

"I call him Sprinkles." Hari smacked the dog on the nose when it whined at the name. "Can you give me a description of the current threat?"

"Yes. He was one of the most devoted of Voldemort's servants who murdered a dozen innocents to kill a close friend of his without provocation."

"I had meant more like how tall he is, that sort of thing."

"Ah. My best guess is he looks something like this." Dumbledore pulled a copy of the *Profit* from his desk.

"He looks like Stubby Boardman?"

" *He does not look like -you read the Quibbler ?*"

"I like to know what's really going on, you know." Hari admired the purpling of the man's face. "That's not a healthy color, other Professor Headmaster. You should see the medic." Hari snapped his

fingers. "Speaking of medics... has anyone been possessed here recently?"

"No!" Dumbledore's reaction was reflexive.

"Hn." Hari looked Dumbledore over. "So where is my principal now?"

"He should be in his Common Room."

"Alright." Hari rose and had turned towards the door before facing Dumbledore again. "Who am I guarding again?"

(A/N John)

So, with luck we will be back to a more regular schedule for a while. We shall see how long this continues.

(A/N 2 John)

Man has this story grown and grown. Third Year is already at seventy-thousand words and I'm barely done with Christmas.

(A/N 3 John)

Also, what was intended by Spoon as a minor joke has instead turned into a major plot point. This seems to be a theme for me. Things have once more spiraled out of my control. Good times.

(A/N 4 John)

That said, it keeps me interested in writing when bits of preplanned stuff just suddenly goes out the window as Spoon (or I) manage to suddenly send things off the rails again.

And Other Gifts of Dubious Merit

Chapter 56: And Other Gifts of Dubious Merit

"Hello Blaise."

The boy didn't even look up from his book. He was enjoying his somewhat trashy novel and didn't see the reason to act shocked. His new stepfather, though... the man sounded like he might be having his short-awaited heart attack.

"Hello, Hari. Can I assume I get nothing for Christmas?"

"Just a reminder to practice. Success..."

"Is its own reward, yes." Blaise turned a page.

"Hello Missus Blaise's mom," Hari greeted the woman who was not-quite cuddling up against his side. "Hello soon-to-be-dead Blaise's stepdad."

"What?" the man rasped.

"Are you married?" Hari asked Circe.

"Yes..."

"Oh. Alright." Hari took a quick step across the room and jabbed a finger into his chest. The man slumped over, blood beginning to leak from his facial orifices. "There. That's better." Hari gave Blaise a smile. "Remember to practice or I will be put out when you get back to school."

"Uh-huh," Blaise hadn't looked up from his book when the man was killed-it wasn't a terribly uncommon event in this house.

"Bye."

"See you."

Hari vanished and Blaise looked up finally to see a piece of paper float to the floor.

Circe picked it up. "This is... is this a bill?"

Blaise's book dropped from his hands. "Pay it!"

"What?"

He considered the suspicions that Tracy had confided in him. "Trust me. Pay it."

"It says in small, used bills without sequential serial numbers."

"Pay. It."

"It's a lot of money, Blaise."

"He's a professional, mother. Pay the damn bill!"

X

X

Hari appeared in the middle of a warzone. The lawn was torn up and what might well have been trenches were carved into the landscaping by magical discharges. Girl-Tobi was flinging garden ornaments at her sister while screaming incoherently. In fairness, Daphne was no longer dodging and was instead using magic herself to catch or deflect the projectiles, sometimes launching objects to intercept things and generally no longer just running in fright.

"Hey, Girl-Tobi."

"Hey Hari." She flung a birdbath at her sister and began to levitate a bench to get a better angle. "HARI!" the bench clattered to the floor.

"I think I have a gift for you here." Hari reached into his cloak and pulled out a pair of boxes. "So, I wasn't sure which ones you'd like, so I got you one of each."

Astoria sniffled happily and took the proffered gifts, still clutching the nundu. "Thanks, Hari."

"Right. I have a few more stops to make." He vanished.

Girl-Tobi tore open her presents. Inside were roller skates. One pair of quads and one pair of inline. A note suggested she try them and see which were better for her and that she wouldn't have to worry about falling because of some runes in the wheels.

A moment later, Astoria flew across the yard as her sister decided to toss her bodily through the hedges. "If you ever try that on me again..." she growled.

Behind them, their parents watched with some trepidation and observed how their lawn was badly damaged by their children. This was going to be several days' work for the elves.

X

X

Dumbledore looked at his pile of presents in surprise. Apparently word had gotten around about young Professor Potter's gifts. This year, he had a vast selection of candies and sweets and nary a book in sight-no, there was one about the history of confectionary. Much better than he had been getting for decades. It was sad how many people thought what he wanted was books-and not even interesting or obscure ones, either. He had fifteen copies of Galbreth's *Principles of Transfiguring the Human Form for Beginners*. He was still trying to decide if those gifts had been intended as insults or were just sort of stupid.

Perched atop his heap was a small object, not even as large as his fist, wrapped in black paper with little red clouds on it. As he watched, a few of the clouds drifted gently in the black not-sky. Dangling from the bow on top was a tag with his name on it and a small card. Inside was a steel ball-bearing roughly two inches across.

Dear Professor Headmaster,

Merry Christmas-although I understand you don't technically celebrate it. I was playing with Runes for gifts this year and so I decided to make you something, I hope you like it. Dumbledore went slightly pale as he considered all the dangers of Runes and the concerns he had about a Third Year experimenting with them. On the upside, that explained why the castle kept having to draw power from the leylines to repair itself. On the downside, that didn't help explain how Mister Professor Potter (and now he was doing it too!) managed to survive whatever caused that damage. He went back to reading. It took a lot of iterations to work out the right ratios and there were some kinks to fix, but it works fine now. I was reading up on Leythan's texts on runic transfiguration and I thought I would make use of them. Take a look at the Runes and see for yourself once you remove the shielding on them. That only lasts for ten seconds, so look fast.

Dumbledore shrugged and sat down on a mountain of gummybears, drawing his wand as he did.

X

X

Professor Snape opened his eyes and looked at the package sitting on his bed. He didn't even bother to wonder how it got there when even the elves knew better than to mess with his things while he was using them. It meant, however, that he didn't need to check who the gift was from-really, who else would do it? He unwrapped what looked rather like a dissected SCUBA mask and a pair of... he

looked again. Unlike many Half-bloods, he kept up with the Muggle world-although not because of wishing to be close to friends or family there. He was just inclined to take all avenues that could safely be used to advance his knowledge of potions. As a result, he also came across other aspects of Muggle culture and life. If he was remembering correctly, the second part of his gift appeared to be a bastardized pair of night-vision goggles.

Dear Professor Snape, read the card, I was experimenting with Runes for Christmas gifts and thought I should make you something. It took a bit of work to get it functional and for a while, it was making chlorine, but it's working properly now. The mask is a potions-rebreather; it uses runes to summon the correct molecules out of the air for human functioning-if it can't find them, it pulls in matter and transfigures it to the appropriate mixture. The little valve at the side controls the O₂ mix so in case of a really big explosion, you can get a little extra movement out of yourself.

The goggles are just see-through-danger goggles. Clouds of noxious gases that blot out the sun or other light-sources won't matter. Nor, come to think of it, will just not having light in the first place. If there are potions that need complete darkness to use, these are your goggles. Have fun and I promise that the mask doesn't make poisons anymore.

-Uchiha Hari

Snape looked warily at his gifts from the most frustrating student-person-he had ever met. He was probably going to make use of the damn things at some point, but he'd be putting that off a while. Certainly, he was going to let Professor Babbling have a look at them first.

X

X

Professor Snape walked into the Great Hall and frowned. He wasn't surprised by the small crowd (for some reason, many people liked to take a break from Professor Potter-even if that was just being out of his immediate vicinity for a time), but he hadn't quite expected to find Albus Dumbledore with a giant bulge in his left cheek.

Snape first served himself some food and took a few sips of lethally strong coffee before he was willing to engage in the headache-inducing task of speaking to Dumbledore who was currently in possession of a present from Hari.

"Headmaster?"

"Yesh, Professhor Shnape?"

"What do you have in your mouth?"

"Jawbreaker," came the muffled reply. Saliva sprayed slightly from the elder wizard's maw.

"Explain." Dumbledore shrugged and pulled the object from his mouth. "Professor... that's a steel ball."

"Yep." Dumbledore grinned broadly. "And I looked at the runes that Mister Potter engraved on it. I'm not sure how he managed to do the work so tiny, but he did. It's quite good, too. It turns saliva into the chemicals that trigger the sensation of sweetness on the tongue and uses the energy generated by the transformation to power itself."

"That's insane."

"And wonderfully sweet. He wrote that he was originally planning to get me a pile of Muggle jawbreakers, but they didn't work properly, so he made this. Apparently it also homes in on a target's lower face if launched at someone."

"I... see." Snape went back to his food, deciding not to examine too carefully how his student had somehow managed to make

something that absurdly complex already. He was terrified enough when considering the boy's achievements without having to concern himself with what experiments Hari might get up to.

"Professor Headmaster Dumbledore Sir?" asked a House Elf.

"Yes, Rinky?"

"Professor Kitty needs your help..."

X

X

Sirius and Remus were enjoying a quiet Christmas in Remus's rooms. The two were nursing hangovers after their binge-drinking the night before. Technically speaking, the binge drinking had mostly been earlier that morning, since they had started at around ten and not passed out until close to five. As it was, Remus was already well on his way to recovering and Sirius was using the hangover remedy he'd mastered as a Third Year when he began sneaking Firewhiskey into the dorms.

"Well, aren't you popular?" Sirius teased as he looked at the pile of gifts for his friend. Most of the paper was pink and had hearts on it.
"Are you sure you aren't robbing some cradles?"

"Yes!" Remus might be recovering, but right now he still had something of a blazing headache and was not in the mood for Sirius's idea of funny. "I am *not* fucking underage girls. *Nor,*" he went on, when Sirius's mouth opened, "am I fucking any of my students!"

"Seems a shame," commented Sirius as he found some hair-of-the-Padfoot and took a swig. "I mean, there were one or two Professors back when we were students where I wish they'd been more receptive to my hints."

"Asking Professor Wren to please let you be her naughty boy was *not* a hint, Sirius. Just be glad that she thought you were charmingly pathetic instead of reporting you."

"I almost wish she had. Can you imagine Professor McG's *face* if she had to deal with *that*?" Sirius tossed the empty bottle behind him and burped. "It'd have been worth the punishment to see her that furious."

"Always a masochist at heart," murmured Remus as he tried to find gifts that weren't from students. "I wonder if that's why you didn't try harder to get out of that collar... OW!" He'd been hit in the back of the head with another bottle. "Hey, look!" he called from under a pile of presents he hoped were just socks and not something else soft and cloth-y. "Here's a pair of gifts and one's for you."

"Gimme!" Sirius jumped on his friend and pawed through the mound, extracting the package with his name on it and tearing it open. Inside was a rat-shaped squeaky-toy modeled on Peter Pettigrew.

Remus watched with amusement as Sirius turned into Sprinkles-he had yet to let the man be "Padfoot" again-and bite down on the toy. It screamed in bloodcurdling fear and pain before trailing off in a whimpering plea for mercy. He looked at the similarly shaped package in his hands and frowned. He opened the card (in the background was a squeal of pained agony).

Dear not-really-Professor Lupin, I understand that you and Sprinkles might not like a certain rat, so I thought you might appreciate something to help deal with those suppressed feelings of anger. I'm told it's unhealthy to keep it bottled up inside. It wasn't that hard to get the runes properly set up. They should remain able to come up with random combinations and I made sure to give them roughly ten-thousand options to pull from. Have fun!

-Professor Uchiha

Remus blinked and then sighed as he heard a voice that sounded rather like Peter's scream that it was sorry and please stop biting.

X

X

==out taKE==

"How do you not... I never did tell you, did I?" Dumbledore asked.

"Nope."

"Harry Potter." Dumbledore frowned at the lack of reaction. "The Boy-Who-Lived?"

"Not ringing any bells, sorry."

"Slayer of Voldemort?"

"Who's that?"

"The most feared Dark Lord in recent memory. Died trying to murder an infant."

"You people are pathetic." Hari shook his head. "This job is going to be a cakewalk. So, what's he look like?"

"Tall, thin, has glowing red eyes. Of course, he's half-dead right now, so you don't need to worry about him just yet."

"I meant my charge."

"Oh. Short, scrawny, underfed; he looks abused, really."

"What level of abuse are we talking?"

"Enough that his arm didn't quite heal right after it got broken. Just as well that Madame Pomfrey had to regrow it last year."

"It's extra to protect him from abuse."

"No need for that." Dumbledore waved a hand dismissively. Hari shrugged. "Oh, and he has green eyes."

"Alright. I'll go introduce myself." Dumbledore watched in confusion as the boy dragged the dog through the wall next to the door.

(A/N John)

So, one more chapter and then things get... weird.

(A/N 2 John)

Seriously. It's another of those times where something short has gone and become a major part of the story.

(A/N 3 John)

On the other hand, I am most disappointed in the people who didn't get the various gifts that Hari gave out.

(A/N 4 John)

Also, now you know why it is that Hari didn't know whom he was guarding. Someone might have forgotten to mention the answer when hiring him.

(A/N 5 John)

I should note that Dumbledore is almost certainly going to regret this summoning more than even in most of those types of stories. And Hari will just be helpful.

The Gifts That Keep On Giving

Chapter 57: The Gifts That Keep On Giving

"You will *not* believe what Hari got me," snarled Daphne as she dropped into a seat in the Prefect's cabin. For some reason, the Prefects had been reluctant to reclaim it, so the Slytherins had done so in their stead. Tam was sitting on an armchair, wearing a sweater with a G and T emblazoned on it. Despite her glower, she seemed somewhat pleased by the garment and was reading a book that Daphne was fairly certain was illegal to possess and she wondered how it was that someone living with the Weasley family had managed to get her hands on it.

Millie was sprawled on a couch with a pair of brass knuckles on her fist that sizzled alarmingly, sending fat, blue sparks arcing into the floor and sending up the acrid smell of ozone. Despite the bruises on her face and the way she was holding her side with her free hand suggesting her ribs were damaged, she was grinning hugely.

Seated by the fireplace, Blaise was reading a book that looked suspiciously like poetry. The cover declared it to be filled with sonnets, but given what she'd heard of boys, that could just be a front for something more... mature. Regardless, she wasn't inclined to ask-in case it was mature material.

"I probably would." Tracy held out a hand with a pair of small objects in her palm. One was a black sphere that had been set into a gold claw and put on a thin, gold chain. The other was a tiny, blue gemstone with an odd luster to it that someone had set into a silver ring made to look like it was decorated with little vines of ivy. "My dad had them set, but... yeah."

"He got me a *nundu cub*!" Daphne shouted.

"Alright," Tracy replied, face curiously blank. "You were right. Well, sort of. I completely believe it. But I know what you meant."

Tam perked up some. "You have a source of nundu fur?" she asked eagerly. "When it sheds, can I have some? Please?"

"What?" Daphne asked. "Oh. Sure." She didn't sound like she'd really been listening. "What are those, Tracy?"

"Very, very fancy gems. Mum says they're incredibly valuable."

"HARI POTTER WILL BE THE FUCKING DEATH OF ME!" Pansy roared as she stomped into the compartment. "Blaise, get the fuck out now before I shoot you."

Blaise froze, confused. "What did I do?"

"I'm going to change into a skirt I can reach my gun in before Hari finds out I didn't wear one all break." Her hand groped at her side, trying to draw her sidearm. "Now if you don't get that ass out of here, I'm busting caps in it." She blinked. "And see? He's got me cursing like some goddamn dock ho." She managed to pull her gun. "You have five seconds."

Blaise fled.

Tracy was staring in open-mouthed horror. "Did I just hear you swear?"

"Hari's fault," Pansy had her trunk open and was already pulling out a skirt. "The worst part? I felt like I was fucking naked without being able to reach my gun!"

"Language," chided Hermione as she walked in. "And does anyone know why Blaise is cowering outside?"

"Hermione," said Pansy sweetly as she found a skirt and began to dress. "If you don't leave my language alone, I'm going to do to you what I motherfucking threatened to do to the punk bitch out there."

Hermione blinked. "So..." she said as Pansy made sure she could draw her weapon and, on finding she could, relaxed a little. "That just happened. Now I'm going to ask: how and why."

"Hari's fault," Pansy repeated.

"I assumed that. Could you be more specific?"

Pansy held up her Walkman. "Hari got me this for Christmas. Thankfully, he sent some headphones a few days later. My parents have been really edgy since I started listening to it. It's funny, but it kinda fucking grew on me."

"Is that a Walkman?"

"No idea." Pansy shrugged. "It says... well, I can't read what it says on the side. It looks foreign."

"HOW DOES IT WORK!"

"Well, I press play..."

"NOT WHAT I MEANT!" Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I meant that I want to know how he got a Walkman to work while around magic."

"Well, his gift card said he's been experimenting with runes for gifts," Pansy offered.

"He... he did that with runes?" Hermione was slightly pale. "We've been studying them for less than a year. How could he... Hari. Of course."

"Can I come inside now?" called Blaise from the other side of the door.

Pansy scowled. "Yes."

The somewhat pale, olive-skinned boy slipped over to a seat and tried to make himself small, in case Pansy decided she didn't want him around again.

"What did Hari get you, anyway?" asked Tracy when Hermione had settled herself in a seat.

"Stolen plans for a submarine. Really old plans."

"Weird." She held up the jewelry. "He got me these."

"Do you think he's hitting on you?" asked Pansy as she began to clean her gun.

"Nah. I think he just gets me jewels because he doesn't know what else to get me."

"Like how he gets Blaise weapons or me rare documents?"
Hermione offered.

"Or gets me Muggle things and Daphne things that are..." Pansy trailed off. "Actually... he seems to be pretty random with your things, Daphne."

"I've noticed." Daphne looked at the little cameo foe-glass. "And it never shows him right before Christmas, either. These days, it just stays blank, too."

"Well, most of the threats to your rule are gone." Millie adjusted her brass knuckles. "Otherwise, we'd have to deal with them."

X

X

"How did you do it?" hissed Hermione as Hari sat on the bench in the Great Hall, watching the empty seat beside Dumbledore.

"How did I do what?"

"You made electricity work!"

Hari blinked. "I think you'll find that the non-magical world has been doing that for—"

"That's not what I mean. You got a Walkman to work. How did you do that?"

"Well, I built that one from scratch," Hari replied. "I had gotten the one I picked up from a store to work, but tapes didn't have enough capacity for songs, so I just made something new instead."

"You got electronics to work and decided that it wasn't good enough!"

"Yeah. Sure, the micro-runes for thunder did a great job of powering it, but the hard part was dealing with the polarized magnetic fields. Did you know that magic creates some really interesting effects on unshielded electronics?"

"Yes! But faraday cages don't work. It's been tried."

"Oh. I didn't do that. I just reversed the polarity on a few runes and used them to cancel out the effects of background magic."

"You can't do that!"

"Seals helped." Hari shrugged. "But like I said, it didn't do what I wanted it to do, so I made a new device instead."

"A new device."

"Yep. It's a little wardstone with micro-engraved runes to trap specific sound wave in a field and then create echoes of them and release them through the amplifier seals. Pretty simple stuff, really. It's not like I was trying to create a steel ball that transforms saliva into sweets."

"Simple."

"Yeah."

"Do me a favor?"

"Sure, Hermione." Hari gave her an easy smile that in a few years, might be special, but mostly was just arrogant and condescending now.

"Have Pansy show Professor Babbling your gift to her."

"Alright."

"Seriously, though: how did you get electronics to work?"

"Just dealt with the electromagnetic waves from magical presences by adding some polarizing seals. It wasn't all that complicated. I had to work out which seals wouldn't interfere with the wiring. It was a godssend when I managed to rewire a circuit board to form the seals." Hari held up an object. "Want a digital watch?"

Hermione blinked. Then she checked the time on it.

"It uses some rune that deals with ley-something-or-others to keep it synched. Just had to add another seal to do the checking."

"So you have a self-correcting, electronic watch?"

"I made a calculator work, too. I had a few other things I wanted to work on, but I had to deal with making gifts."

"..." Hermione just stared at him.

"I'm trying to work on a system to visually represent arithmantic equations in three dimensions. Or at least to adjust modular parts."

"You want to make a computer."

Hari paused to think for a moment. "Pretty much. But I don't need the games. But that's gonna take me a lot more time. There's a lot of

parts to get working and they have to play nice with each other."

X

X

"No way!" cried a redhead from the house of lions.

From across the Hall, Daphne and Tracy watched as Astoria spoke to her friends in Gryffindor. The expressions on their faces were... interesting. The mix of horror and disbelief was pretty much all the two needed to guess what was being discussed. The exclamation of 'Cor!' at regular intervals and one cry of 'Charlie says those are bloody scary!' were good hints, too. The looks they had when Astoria held her hands barely apart and tried to nuzzle the air between them were amusing.

Girl-Tobi was nodding rapidly and gesturing towards Daphne, who was suddenly no longer amused. She glowered at those observing her until they looked away, although Gred and Gred looked especially intrigued.

"Do you think you'll get in trouble?" asked Tracy.

"Nah. I mean, I don't think it's technically illegal to own roller skates."

"What?"

"I think that's what Astoria was telling them about."

"You don't think it was the nundu?"

"Nah. She's much more excited by the skates."

X

X

Dumbledore rose from his seat. He was wearing a Santa Claus outfit, except with an obviously fake beer-belly sticking out from under the top and the pants were about sixteen sizes too large and held up by suspenders made of rubber so they bounced erratically. His hat was made to look like an Aston Martin with a tiny man leaning out of the driver's side with an even smaller gun, firing it off at imaginary enemies behind him while the headlights occasionally flipped open to reveal machinegun barrels that sporadically rattled off barrages of dry rice into the students below. In one hand, he had an empty martini glass with an olive in it and in his right was a blow-up doll of Pussy Galore. One side of his face was badly distended, as though a large object were being stored there.

"Welcome back from another Christmas break," Dumbledore called out. He set the scantily dressed doll in the seat beside him and coughed. "Having spent your time gorging yourselves on pudding and lazing around ignoring your homework, it's no doubt a welcome change to be back to the drafty castle here in the Highlands.

"There are a few announcements to make before I let you trot off for a final day of misery before you can return to a regular class schedule. Firstly, I want to see Mister Potter in my office as soon as lunch finishes. Secondly, I want to see Mister Potter in my office as soon as lunch finishes. Thirdly, there appears to be a large, black dog missing; if anyone finds it, please let Mister Potter know."

Dumbledore plucked the olive from his glass and chewed thoughtfully. "While I have your attention, I would like to remind Miss Parkinson that misuse of her firearm will be frowned upon in terms so strong I do not think I can do them justice without profanity. I will leave the selection of words to your imagination, although, Miss Parkinson seems to be exhibiting a similarly vulgar vocabulary, so maybe you already know what it is I'm looking for.

"You are all dismissed. Where is Mister Potter?"

X

X

==out tAKE==

"What are you doing in here?" asked a voice by Harry's ear. The entire common room screamed and whirled to face the boy with the swirling red eye who they'd never seen before. "And you," the boy added, pointing to Hermione. "Why aren't you in your Common Room?" A pause. "Where did you get this?" he asked, suddenly beside Hermione. He was holding her wand and examining it. As the watching masses observed, the wood transfigured into a very realistic model of a penis and was then used to repeatedly bash Hermione's forehead and face. "Remember that your wand is a penis that hit you in the face," he said. Then he snapped it.

"Who the hell are you?" snarled Percy Weasley, Head Boy badge gleaming.

Hari walked passed the boy and over to a short, red-haired girl. "Hey, Tam." He looked at her for a moment. "Oh. You're not Tam. Well, we'll fix that."

"Seriously," added Oliver Wood, his wand in his hand. "Who the bloody hell are you?"

"Why are you wearing Gryffindor colors?" Hari asked the cowering Ginny. "Or does that wait until after, also?" He turned and walked back to Harry. "Come on, you. We have to get you back to your Common Room. I have a busy night ahead of me."

"You're not going anywhere," stated Gred. Most of the Gryffindors had drawn their wands. Godric's house was not known for backing down.

"Nice solidarity," Hari commented. "Terrible formation and poor choice of foe." He grabbed Harry and Hermione by the arms. That was when the spells began to fly.

(A/N Spoon 1)

So John is sick so he tasked me once again with relaying to you information about the chapter. He really has far too much faith in me.

(A/N Spoon 2)

This chapter is setting up for a very minor plot point that will happen next chapter. Oh, and big thing number like... six, probably. The sixth big thing that was supposed to be a minor plot thing and mutated horribly is starting next chapter. There's actually a hint to what that is in this chapter. Good luck finding it.

(A/N Spoon 3)

Pansy gets more character development! Sort of. I'm not sure if cursing caused by over exposure to rap music is really character development. But it's hilarious so I love that entire section anyway. And then Hermine has a sort of logic mental break down for a moment. It was very short though.

(A/N Spoon 4)

Feel sorry for Harry, Other-Hermione and Not-Tam. Things will only get worse for them.

Rated M for Mature

Chapter 58: Rated M for Mature

Or...

Warning: This chapter contains major character death, almost nudity and references to sexual content. And it's only getting worse from there.

"Hello, Professor Headmaster." Hari was seated in an armchair in the Headmaster's office, feet propped on the man's desk and a notebook in his hand in which he was scribbling various runes.
"What can I do for you?"

"Well..." Dumbledore seemed at a bit of a loss as to how to handle this. "Um..." There were few things that in any way put him off, but somehow, he just did *not* feel up to this discussion right now. "Never mind." He would find another solution to the problem. There was just no way... he would try some other contacts.

"Alright, Professor Headmaster." Hari rose and walked out through a bookcase that Dumbledore was fairly certain had been solid a minute ago.

X

X

"What did Professor Dumbledore want?" Hermione demanded when Hari sat down in the Common Room.

"No idea. He told me not to worry about it." He motioned to Tam and she peered over his shoulder as he began to scrawl into the markings on the wall. "That should just about do it, I think."

"If you say so," Tam replied. "I have no idea what you're doing."

"Altering a soul-glyph." Tam was suddenly on the far side of the Common Room. "But I've been missing a part to finish the bridge in the gap here."

"I'm not going to ask," Daphne said as she and Tracy began to move away from the corner Hari was using.

X

X

"Professor Babbling?"

The middle-aged woman (insofar as that could be determined with Witches and Wizards. She could be in her seventies) looked up from her lesson plans. "What can I do for you, Miss Parkinson?"

Pansy blinked. "How do you know my name?"

"You threatened a student with a weapon of some sort over food. That kind of thing gets discussed in staff meetings." Pansy had the grace to flush. "But since you're not in my class, I must ask why you are here."

"Well, Hermione wanted me to show you this." Pansy held out a small box.

"What is it?"

"It plays music."

"Music?"

"Yes." Pansy pressed the play button and *Public Enemy* began to blast for a moment. "Music."

"We can debate the terminology you use at a later point. Where did you get that?"

"It was a gift from Hari Potter."

"Who?"

"Hari Potter."

"Did he say what it was?"

"Well, sort of. I was listening when he tried to explain to Hermione. He said that he'd been planning to give me a 'Walkman', which I gather is a Muggle device for playing music, but he said that after getting the electronics to work that it didn't do what he wanted, so he made something else."

"I..." Professor Babbling held out her hand. "May I see that?"

Pansy handed it over with a certain reluctance.

"Is... is this an engraved..." Professor Babbling began to mutter to herself as she pulled out a jeweler's loop and began to make some notes on her lesson plan, writing over it without apparently realizing. "Miss Parkinson," she said suddenly, still scribbling madly. "Please be so kind as to go to your head of house and inform him that I need him and the Headmaster here immediately."

Pansy blinked and swallowed a bit of concern as she left the room, worried she might not get her gift back.

X

X

When Professor Snape walked into the room, the first words out of his mouth were, "What did Potter do this time?" Then he coughed. "Hello, Madam Marchbanks."

Dumbledore had walked in behind the Potions instructor and raised an eyebrow. "At the risk of sounding rude, and not to say I don't enjoy your company, but why are you here in my castle?"

"Well," said the elderly lady as she pointed at an object on Professor Babbling's desk. "Well, I got the most extraordinary floo call just now. Professor Babbling wanted me to take a look at this and I discovered something that I was under the impression was a left over project from last year's N.E.W.T.s which hadn't been ready in time. Imagine my surprise to learn that it was, in fact, a gift made by a Third Year." Her face was strange as she watched them. "And I wonder at your lack of surprise."

"Honestly, if we're talking about Potter, that seems about par for the course," said Snape. "I mean, it's not like he's here to learn the curriculum. I think he just likes to have instruction on things he hasn't been exposed to yet. And someone to ask questions when researching something highly forbidden."

"Madam Marchbanks," Dumbledore smiled slightly. "Professor Potter was responsible for last year's record O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. I find little shocking about him. Worrying... that is a different matter. And frustrating. That one often. But I'm never really surprised anymore."

"That's good. Would you send for him?"

"Hello Madam Old Lady Person."

Madam Marchbanks fainted.

X

X

"Welcome back to the land of the conscious," Dumbledore offered with a beaming smile and twinkling eyes. "I think you have begun to enjoy the effects of Professor Potter's presence on the world. He does so like to turn up when asked for."

"I'm just trying to be helpful," said Hari.

"Yes, well, I wanted to inform you that you're being granted your N.E.W.T. in runes for this work."

"Can I still take my class?" Hari asked.

"Why would you want to?"

"Well, I have all these questions I want to ask and there are things I don't know and I like to be able to ask the Professor for help."

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "Of course you can."

"Oh good. But why are you giving me a N.E.W.T. for this?" Hari pointed at the not-Walkman. "It wasn't that impressive, really. I had to work much harder on the microengraving for Professor Headmaster's jawbreaker. And it was a pain to work out how to maintain a steady rate of transfiguring saliva into triggers for sweetness."

Madam Marchbanks opened her mouth and Dumbledore extracted a steel ball from a pocket and offered it to her. After a few minutes' study, she sighed. "I'll go fill out the form for the mastery."

"Can I-"

"Yes; you can still attend the class, Professor Potter," Dumbledore plucked the jawbreaker back and shoved it into his mouth. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a guest arriving shortly."

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Bill Weasley was a bit surprised when Professor Dumbledore had sent word for him. More importantly, he'd been surprised that the Goblins had agreed to let him go, but apparently the man had paid the impressive fees required to get a cursebreaker to come to Hogwarts. What he could possibly need at the most heavily warded place in the country was beyond him, but that was part of the reason

he'd wanted to go. Besides, he hadn't seen his siblings since the summer and it was somewhat lonely work, digging up old tombs.

Professor Dumbledore met him at the gates and ushered him into a secret passageway that he suspected the twins would kill to learn about. He would extract some hefty payment for revealing it when he had the chance.

"This is a temporary passage," Dumbledore said. "Just for the moment. I don't normally need to quickly smuggle people from the gates to the castle... *out* on the other hand..."

Which just left Bill wondering what he was there to do.

"Please see if you can help," Dumbledore said when they stood outside a room with a lion rampant on the door. "I'm grasping at straws and my only remaining option is rather unfortunate."

Bill pushed open the door and stopped dead.

In the back of his mind, he noted his former runes Professor standing against a wall, but his attention was on the woman in the middle of the room. She wasn't short exactly, just not quite tall enough to be 'tall', probably five feet and seven inches, but somehow that just wasn't that important at the moment. Cascading from her head were waves of black hair that gleamed in the firelight. Her face was sharply featured, cheekbones high and jutting out proudly and a nose that was a bit too small to be hawkish, but had the same hunter-bird quality. Large, green eyes stared at him, somehow their apparent expressiveness smothered by something. The smattering of freckles across her nose was just the finishing touch.

Of course, he didn't manage to look at her face long. Not when there was so much more to 'observe'. For one thing, a lean, smooth neck with a thick, leather collar across it was a definite draw to the eye. It was rather plain, really; just black leather with a silver bell dangling from a thin chain.

After that was what left Bill with a severe blush and a distinct trouble moving his eyes. A pair of what had to be the most perfectly formed breasts he'd ever seen were standing proudly on her torso, encased by an incredibly flattering bra. While Bill was a Pureblood, he was also significantly more worldly than most as a result of a profession that involved a great deal of travel and a line of work that was generally seen as being for those slightly unhinged anyway. Because of that, he had some experience with lingerie, not perhaps as much as he might have enjoyed, but still a great deal more than his peers. What he was looking at was something special, though; It was made of layers of overlapping, sheer, black lace with red and gold thread-he thought it might be metal wires acting as support-forming intricate patterns that he couldn't manage to focus on because the top of the cups didn't quite cover the young woman's nipples and the Scottish winter bit deep into the castle; even the blazing fire nearby wasn't enough to keep the twin peaks from hardening into wonderfully pale, pink buds... Bill's attempts to wrest his eyes away were unfortunately downward.

He observed a wonderfully trim belly, surprisingly athletic for someone in the magical world, it was lean with a small navel and two wonderfully defined lines marking her pelvic bone curving further down. Which was where his mind started to crack. The young woman's panties were of a similar make to her bra, with layers of overlapping lace hiding things from view and threaded with gold and red. He was not used to the shape of the garment-it rode high on her hips, following the curve of her body and dipped incredibly low, barely covering her at all with that narrow triangle of fabrics. When he managed to look further down, finally away from more alluring views, he saw a pair of high heels so tall that she was standing on the balls of her feet, which were not quite as delicate as he might have expected, proportioned for her size, they were sturdy-as much as could be told through the crisscrossing black straps keeping them in place.

Bill turned to face the hallway and took a deep breath, eyes closed. There was more going on here than a pretty bird; he recognized the

tickle of probing at his mental defenses now that he wasn't staring at her and worked to clear his mind, bringing up active protections in his mind in addition to his usual, passive ones. A blast of cold water interrupted his meditations, but had the gratifying effect of negating the other problem he'd been dealing with.

Slowly turning, he wrung water out of his hair. "Alright, I've got a handle on the mental effects. What's the problem?"

"Mental effects?" asked Dumbledore, mildly.

"Yeah. It reminds me of something I encountered on a statue of Aphrodite when we were doing a dig in... anyway the point is that one of the Bulgarians with me on the dig said it was rather like Veela allure."

"Fascinating."

"As I said: I have a handle on it. What am I here to do?"

"Well..." Dumbledore seemed at a bit of a loss. "You've observed the garments?"

"Despite their tiny size, they're somewhat hard to miss, yes." Bill flinched from the somewhat familiar death-glare being leveled at him by the black-haired woman.

"We're having trouble removing them."

"Umm... at the risk of sounding silly: they look like clothes *intended* to be removed." The glare somehow grew more intense. "Alright; you have me here, so it probably is a curse, a ward, or a rune scheme that's involved. Right?" When Dumbledore nodded, Bill went on. "I'm not sure what's going on here but I'm guessing that you want me to... examine this and remove it?"

"Right again, Mister Weasley."

Bill closed his eyes for a moment. "Given the subject, I admit it might be difficult to keep my mind on task."

"It had *better not be*, Mister Weasley!" Bill's blood ran cold; the voice was young and had a slightly smoky subtlety to it that he usually thought of as belonging to older women, but the accent was tinged with the Highlands and the tone was unmistakable.

"Professor McGonagall?"

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==out TAKE==

Dumbledore looked up when Professor McGonagall stormed into his office, shaking with rage. "Albus!" The man appeared lost in a lemon-drop haze and didn't react until she threw a book at him. His sudden reaction (dodging) was enough to prove he was amongst the attentive again. "We have a problem."

"Oh?"

"I was just in Gryffindor Tower."

"That sounds perfectly fine."

"It was a madhouse!"

"Again: normality is present."

"I have limbs strewn about. Not attached to anyone. And Percy Weasley is dead! Someone threw him out of the Tower... *through a wall*. He fell seven stories to his death."

"Huh."

"And Mister Potter has been kidnapped."

"He what?" Dumbledore was suddenly alert.

"Some boy with black hair and a red eye came in and grabbed Potter and Miss Granger. Some of my lions objected and apparently he started lopping off limbs."

"Ah. That would be Mister Potter's new bodyguard."

"Albus! I have my First Years playing at jigsaw puzzling my students back together for Madame Pomfrey; she needs someone to match limbs with persons."

"Good, so the problem is well in hand."

"The Head Boy is *dead*!"

"Who was the Head Boy again?"

"Percy Weasley!"

"That's unfortunate. But the Weasleys are remarkably easy to deal with. I'll send them some more money and they'll stop complaining. Be a good girl and go find me Mister Potter."

(A/N 1 Spoon)

So John is once again sick, and I am the last hope standing between you lovely readers and no authors notes. Fear not, I shall not waiver in my duty. Until John gets better.

(A/N 2 Spoon)

So. This chapter. Yeah. Some of it was John's doing, I think. Actually, I suggested he be given a mastery in Runes, and I was the one who suggested Hari's thoughtful (or more importantly thoughtless) gift to Professor McGonagall. Oh! I know! John brought in Bill Weasley. So not all of this chapter was my fault. Poor Bill.

(A/N 3 Spoon)

Not gonna lie, the whole McGonagall thing was supposed to be like, a chapter and a half if that of funny side plot that'd just be glossed over afterwards. Instead it's spread to three chapters plus content much later on.

(A/N 4 Spoon)

I realize Percy isn't technically a "major character" but he is a "major prat" sooo works for me.

(A/N 5 Spoon)

John said when he feels better he'll come give you all proper authors notes so rejoice.

Seriously, It's Worse Now

Chapter 59: Seriously, It's Worse Now

"Yes, nyah." The young woman's face had a terrifying scowl on it-all the more terrifying because it was so familiar and that meant he'd been checking out his former head of house.

"Uh..." Bill just stared for a moment, although now instead of lewdly, it was a sort of vacant expression of someone whose brain was trying to shut down. Eventually, that cleared. "You look great?"

The lovely woman's eye twitched. Now that Bill was paying attention to details, there were some things that leapt out at him. It wasn't anything major, but there are sometimes little things that just grab someone by the throat and demand notice. Things like the black tail wrapped around her left thigh and the two triangular ears on the top of her head, laid flat in the mass of hair.

"Mister Weasley, I will thank you to stop staring, nyah."

"I think I'm supposed to be staring, Professor." Bill rubbed the back of his head. "I'm supposed to be studying rune work, yes?"

"I... uh... then stay focused, nyah!"

Bill shook his head and pulled a device rather like a pair of opera glasses from his vest. Unlike normal opera glasses, these had well over a dozen lenses on various armatures sticking out of them and waving gently in idleness as he put them on. "Let's see what we have here."

He didn't say anything else as he approached the stiff Professor and drew a notebook and pencil from his pocket; in his line of work, it was not always easy to get a quill to work and they had long ago discovered that pencils were easier than getting pens that could

write wherever curses needed breaking. His examination was silent except for the scritch-scratch of his observations being written down.

Finally, he stepped back. "Some of this looks vaguely familiar, but I'm having trouble placing it." He took the glasses off and paged through his notes. "I'll be damned if I understand how parts of this work."

"You'll be damned if you can't help, nyah!" The expression on the young face of his Professor was dark and yet somehow enchantingly distracting-though not literally since the slight prodding at his mental barriers was nothing on what he normally dealt with.

"Where did I see some of those schema before?" he muttered. He closed his eyes and cocked his head. Suddenly he stared, wide-eyed at the ceiling. "Did you just say 'nyah'?" he asked.

"NO!" she snapped. Her face went tight and twisted before she finally spat out: "Nyah."

"Oh." Bill frowned. "Because if you *had*, then I might have some idea of what is going on. But since you didn't..."

"I... I guess I might have, nyah," McGonagall allowed.

"Oh. That changes things. Because this seems familiar for a reason then. One of my colleagues was helping to loot a ruined shrine somewhere near Kyoto and while he was in Japan, he stopped off in one of the magical shops in Kyoto and purchased a prank item." Bill reached into his pockets and began to pull out various notebooks as he went on. "It was designed to be used on males as a way of messing with them. It would attack the victim by replacing his clothing with itself and applying a few illusions and some compulsion charms. And the only way to get it off is to use the password."

"Password?" asked Professor Babbling.

"Yes. Each one has a password built into it to remove the garment. There are several, but the one he brought back was a catgirl outfit.

Now I know why it was familiar. Once we got it off of Johnson, I spent quite a bit of time trying to work out how the thing functioned. I have my notes in here somewhere." Bill pulled out a little, black book. "Here we go."

The others watched as he flipped the tiny pages and began to compare it with his scribblings on the garment in front of him.
"Hmm..."

"I don't like the sound of that, nyah."

"Well, I think I may need to reexamine you. I was trying to be less... focused if I could help it. But I didn't find the part of the scheme that has the password in it, so I need to do another try." Bill turned to face the door. "I don't think there is a good way to say this, Professor McGonagall; I need you to lie down on the bed and spread your legs."

"You *what*, nyah?"

"I did not do as complete a mapping of the runes as I might have because I wasn't sure what I was looking for and was trying to reduce discomfort for both of us. I know what I need to find now, so..."

Professor McGonagall walked stiffly to the bed, her hips swaying alluringly (Bill was fairly certain of that even not looking because it was built into the prank clothes) and lay back on the bed. "Get this over with, nyah."

Bill turned around, donning his cursebreaker glasses again and leaned over the magnificent chest, going over it and tracing runes with his pencil to make sure he was reading them correctly. "Not here." He moved down and his ears were burning brightly as he stared at the black fabric between his Professor's legs. The little mewing sound she made when he traced a rune with the eraser of his pencil was not helping. "I think we may have a problem."

"You're damned right we do, nyah!"

"Well, I found the part of the scheme where the password goes in the prank clothes..."

"Good. What is it, nayh?"

"That's just it. There's nothing there." Bill blushed. "Well... I was expecting that the worst-case scenario was that someone had used a rune-bridge to jump that part of the programming and I'd just have to find a way to safely remove it, but it's just not there. I don't think this is prank clothing. In fact..."

"Yes, nyah?"

Bill closed his eyes and stood up, trying to banish the images in his head. "When I was doing my research on the prank clothes, I did a great deal more looking into the matter. The prank clothes are based on a slightly less innocent type of clothing meant for... well... sex slaves."

"*SEX SLAVES, NYAH!*" The shrill scream was far too attractive for what it was.

"Well, yes. I mean, it's generally assumed that they're willing, but..." Bill shrugged. "On the other hand, even those have some sort of removal condition." He rubbed his face. "I still have one more bit I can check," he offered.

"Do it, nyah."

"Alright." Bill took a deep breath. "Please roll over and raise your... um... rear." He opened his eyes and saw a green death-glare that he was surprised had not actually manifested as a killing curse. "There's more to the scheme there. Maybe the password is just somewhere else." The look on her face was utterly terrifying. "It's your call."

"Tell anyone about this and your death will be slow and painful, nyah. My wrath will be like the weight of Hogwarts on your skull, William Weasley. Nyah." She rolled over and raised her ass so that Bill could (after muttering a small prayer of thanks and another of horror) once again begin to examine runes.

The first thing he noticed was that unlike the prank clothing and even the slave clothing, the back of the thong was lower than on a normal person to allow for the tail to emerge at the base of the tailbone. He traced a rune and the purring sound made him fairly certain that when this was over, his Professor was going to gut him. "Professor?"

"WHAT? Nyah."

"There's some more that I can't see... I... um... one of us is going to have to... well... spread you a bit." Bill hoped he didn't die for that.

"I can help," said Dumbledore. His wand jabbed out and Bill's eyes widened in amazement as Professor McGonagall's rear was spread so he could see the fabric between her legs.

Bill decided not to ask the application of the charm for fear of the answer and instead tried to not pay attention to just how amazing his former Professor's ass was. It was during that effort that he found himself staring at a small, red cloud right... he tore his eyes away from there. "Alright. I think I've got the whole thing mapped out now," he said as he straightened up and put away his glasses. "So, I'm sure now that there is no password. All the models I found when I was doing research had that, so I think this is a custom piece."

"That's so much better, nyah."

"Well, it *does* mean if you can find the maker, you can probably find out how to remove it."

"No, nyah!"

"I think what Professor McGonagall means is that you should take some time to study the runes and see if there is a way you can discern." Dumbledore was torn between amusement and frustration at this situation. Mostly frustration, but it was funny to see this level of chaos somehow contained in such a small area.

Bill sat down crosslegged in a corner and began to pour over the book he'd filled with scribblings. "I don't recognize a huge portion of the scheme," he commented as he began working to dissect the various parts. "Some of this stuff isn't runework I've ever seen."

"Why don't you try covering it, Minerva?" prompted Dumbledore.

"Don't you think I did, nyah?" Professor McGonagall was glaring at the old man instead of Bill now. "The clothes just vanished and appeared in my dresser, nyah."

"Well, a bunch of the prank clothes models are designed for pranking people, so they generally prevent people from hiding the effects," commented Bill. "You might be able to use other clothes from the line of products if that part of the array is still present... I'll check."

"The same line meaning similar wear?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yeah. That's the idea..." Bill blinked and began to scramble to find something in another notebook. "Though it appears that part of the array has been replaced with... something nearly impossible."

"What are you talking about?" asked Professor Babbling.

"This has an intent ward built in. Like an actual intent ward. Not just anchoring the ward, the actual ward itself is in here."

"That's..."

"Not impossible, but very, very rare, yes." Bill began to make some notes. "Someone definitely saw the original costume and adapted

the effects. But it's broader. Instead of needing to use other clothes from the product line, it can just be anything."

"So I need to dress slatternly, nyah?" demanded Professor McGonagall.

"No; not at all!" Bill replied. "I suspect that you will have to get much closer to whorish. Slatternly sounds a bit too archaic."

"Minerva!" Dumbledore called in a warning tone. "Please do not kill the messenger."

"Why, nyah?"

"Because he's doing us a favor."

"Hn. Nyah." She crossed her arms. "These are really uncomfortable, nyah." She muttered. "I haven't had them this big in years, nyah." Her eyes bugged out and she went brilliant red.

"Wait..." Bill took a moment to recover, but his brain was already processing what she said after filtering out the thought about his Professor. "You're having trouble crossing your arms?"

"That's what I said, nyah!"

"Uh... could you turn around, Professor? Please?" Bill rose and walked over to her as she did so. "Please don't kill me, but I need to check something." He took a deep breath and then slipped his hand inside the left cup of her bra and squeezed.

X

X

When he woke up, there was a throbbing on the side of his head, but he ignored it. "That is impossible."

"That you're alive? That's because he wouldn't let me kill you, nyah!"

"No. That's a transfiguration!"

"Thank you for pointing that out, Mister Weasley," she hissed. "I am a master of the art, nyah."

"Not through runes! That can't be done! You know how hard it is to do human transfiguration?"

"Master. Of. The. Art. Nyah."

"Well, imagine doing that without being able to control the magic. You have to preset the magic and get it to work properly."

"Oh." McGonagall looked a bit stunned.

"This is completely outside my skills. Who did this? You should send for that person. I'm out of my depth."

"Fine, nyah!" snapped McGonagall. "Albus, go get-

"You called?"

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==ouT TAKE==

"ALBUS!" Snape stormed into the Headmaster's office with a snarl of rage on his normally snarling face.

"What ever seems to be the problem, Severus?"

"Potter is in my house-

"So that's where he went."

"And I told him to get out and the brat you hired told me no and I said he had to leave or I'd make him and he told me to go ahead."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Did you make him?"

"I tried. But he wasn't playing fair. He kept not holding still for me to hit with curses and had a running commentary about how I didn't know what I was doing and that was why I didn't get the Defense post."

"Interesting."

"There's a mudblood in my house, too."

"Oh?"

"Granger! Why did it have to be *that* mudblood?"

"Ah."

"I also got a letter from Lord Parkinson about his daughter. She woke up with your new employee in the Girl's Dorm."

"Alright. Anything else, Severus?"

"No. Aren't you going to do something about this?"

"Maybe. In time."

"That reminds me: most of the Sixth and Seventh Years in my house have vanished."

"Any chance they're dead?"

"No idea."

"Well, I can always hope."

(A/N Spoon 1)

Patience my friends, John is almost authors noting again! And writing as well! We had a quite large period where we didn't actually write, mostly because John was sick, and then after recovering from his *second* bout of sickness, some WoW thing happened I forgot the name of so he's been distracted.

(A/N Spoon 2)

It's really lucky we keep a backlog of chapters, or you guys wouldn't have gotten anything until like, tomorrow probably.

(A/N Spoon 3)

Anyway. Now you see the further chaos Hari's gift has brought, in the form of a cat girl! No, Hari isn't trying to enslave McGonagall, the explanation for why he got her the outfit is next chapter. Honestly, he was just trying to help.

(A/N Spoon 4)

Also poor Bill, he was just trying to help either. Professor McGonagall has one hell of a right hook though, huh?

(A/N Spoon 5)

But yeah, this thing stretches (Technically) about one and a half more chapters. It wasn't supposed to do that. I suggested Hari get Professor McGonagall a catgirl outfit for Christmas, John saw my idea and turned the dial all the way up to John levels. Thus this was born. Did set the stage for one my new favorite pairings though, so there's that.

(A/N Spoon 6)

Not much happens in the outtake, but it does show into the mindset of Other Snape and Other Dumbledore. Next one

should have him meeting his Other Friends properly, I hope. It's not actually written yet.

Siriusly Risqué

Chapter 60: Siriusly Risqué

Professor McGonagall whirled with appreciable speed and lashed out with a spell at the source of the voice. There was a crashing sound as Hari slammed in to a nearby wall. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall stared with open mouths.

"You... hit him." Bill thought that Dumbledore sounded a little too impressed by this, even if the kid had shown up without warning.

"No I didn't," replied Professor McGonagall. "I cast a cutting curse. Nyah."

"You cast a cutting curse on someone young enough to be one of your students?" demanded Bill.

"Technically he *is* one of her students," Dumbledore explained. "But he's also almost certainly the cause of the current problem."

"'Almost' my tail-bearing ass, you old coot, nyah! There was a *note* ! He signed it, nyah!" She turned to the wall with rubble strewn about it. "Get out here so I can hex you!"

Hari slowly and rather gingerly extracted himself from a pile of masonry. The curse that flew at him splashed against the wall as he crashed into a wall on the other side of the room. "I feel like this is a place where people say 'ow'," came his voice from the depths of a new mess of stonework. "But it doesn't hurt. It's just annoying." His head appeared again.

McGonagall raised her wand and paused. "Mister Potter, nyah."

"Yes?"

She stared at his face, half of which had what could be best described as a writhing, tribal-style tattoo crawling on it. As she watched, it began to spread across to the other side as well. "What is this, nyah?" she pointed at herself.

"Your gift?"

"WHY?"

When Hari's mouth opened, Bill raised a hand. "Not to interrupt here, but perhaps we could focus on the problem at hand?"

"Which is?" Hari's head cocked to the side.

"How to get it off her."

"You don't?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I fixed it."

Bill coughed. "Fixed it?"

"Well, I was going to get Professor Kitty the one off the rack in the store-

"You went to Japan to get your Professor a gift?"

"-Of course not. I had this on hand already." Bill decided not to ask why someone who looked like he was the same age as his youngest brother would have one of those and motioned for him to continue. "But it didn't work properly. Someone had been forced to use a password matrix to bridge a gap in their work, so I made some adjustments so it would work properly."

"That's all?"

"Well, no. It really was pretty amateurish work, so I built a new one from scratch that functioned properly. Do you know that someone was using illusion runes instead of actually making physical changes?" Hari shook his head in disappointment at the faulty craftsmanship. "And they'd left out the attraction-effect from the original model. So I put that back in too. They even wanted to try and sell more of their clothes, but since I was building a new one, I thought it would be best to rewrite the runes so that it didn't require specific merchandise. I don't know why they didn't do it themselves; it was the work of an afternoon."

Bill's mouth was gaping at the casual way the boy just stated that he had created a complex and mostly original work in the space of a few hours, not to mention had broken several well-established laws of how magic worked (alright, technically he hadn't actually broken any rules, but there were principles that everyone followed because it was too hard or dangerous not to and he'd fucked *those* right up the ass).

"Well then," snarled McGonagall. "I'll cut it off, nyah."

"That might not work out well," said Hari in a tone more severe than any of the three Professors present had ever heard him use. "I was working on soulbound rune-networks at the time, so I thought it would be a good place to put what I'd learned to use."

"You *what*?" demanded Bill.

"So the outfit is now bonded to your magic. I don't know what effect it would have if you cut it... but it's probably not good."

"So." McGonagall's voice was icy. "You stuck me in the getup, bound it to my soul, and it was an *experiment*, nyah?"

"Of course not! I learned how to do it studying this." Hari pointed to a spot on his neck that was the center of his moving tattoo.

Bill raised a hand. "Do... can I take a look at that?"

Hari shrugged. "Go ahead."

The staff members watched Bill pull out his glasses and stare at Hari's neck for several minutes. "This is insane."

"Well, the overlapping runes were tricky to understand, sure." Hari was holding still so Bill could examine the curse mark. "But it's really quite elegant once you fix all the gaps the creator left in it. And I had to rework the section that was meant to contain a soul because I wasn't going to attach a soul to mine."

"I... see..." Bill put his glasses away. "Yeah, this is way out of my league. I don't think I've encountered overlapping runes more than twice and never like this. How many layers are there in it?"

"At least a dozen. I didn't have a lot of trouble seeing them, so I couldn't really count them properly."

"So I can't get this off of me?" demanded Professor McGonagall.

"It's not supposed to come off," explained Hari.

"Actually it is," Bill said. "It's a prank outfit that's supposed to be removed eventually. That's why it had a password."

Hari blinked. "Oh. Oops." His voice was absolutely toneless.

"That's all you have to say for yourself, nyah?"

"No. I also want to say: 'is there anything else you need?'"

"Only to confirm that Sprinkles is with Professor Lupin."

"Yes, he's visiting with not-Professor Werewolf."

"Right. Go away." There was a crash and there was a hole in the window. "You know, he's normally better about that kind of thing."

"Albus?" hissed McGonagall. "What are you going to do, nyah?"

There was a further crash somewhere on the grounds. Bill looked out the window to see the cloaked figure pulling itself from a crater on the shore of the Black Lake, dust itself off, and unsteadily jog up to the castle.

"I'm going to see about getting you something to wear."

"Joy. Nyah."

X

X

Sirius was sitting on Remus's couch, idly squeezing his new toy and enjoying the screams of anguish and pleas for mercy while his remaining best friend tried to get a bit of work done. The knock at the door sent Sirius whirling into Sprinkles-form while Lupin glowered at the further interruption-he was (to his great concern) becoming used to the sounds of Peter's misery.

"Remus, it's Professor Dumbledore."

"Flash," replied the werewolf.

"Thunder. Can I come in?" It had been Dumbledore's idea to make use of an old call and response. It was simple and would keep out casual infiltrators without much effort. Having a not-quite-wanted mass murderer in his rooms had engendered a certain degree of paranoia.

"Yes. Just trying to do some grading."

"I will endeavor not to take up more of your time than necessary," Dumbledore said as he entered the room. "But, you see, I have need of our comrade's expertise." Sirius shifted back once the door was closed and had a puzzled expression on his face. "I need you to design an outfit for someone."

"Oh?"

"Someone of the female persuasion. It will need to be... somewhat lewd."

Sirius suddenly had a roguish grin. "See, Moony? I told you he wasn't gay. Pay up."

Dumbledore chuckled a little. "This is not for me or mine. And you'd best not pay up, Remus."

Sirius's grin was now much broader. He held out his hand and Moony placed a galleon in his palm. "You're a bastard, Sprinkles."

"My mother was married to her cousin when she had me." At the blank look. "That would be my dad."

"Oh."

"So, Professor, what is it that I can do for you?"

"I need an outfit that would be for... I'm blanking on the term. A teacher who is uncommonly attractive?"

"Sexy teacher?" prompted Sirius.

"Yes. That."

"Sure. The woman in question, what are her measurements?"

"You don't need to know that. It will be immaterial."

Sirius grinned again. "I sort of do. I mean, I need a general idea of her figure, at least." He conjured a few small mannequins and pointed. "You see the differences?" Dumbledore pointed to a figure and Sirius nodded. A wave of his hand had the figure replicated several times and another clothed them in various outfits.

"You're quite good at that," Remus noted. "Been dressing up dolls for your fun time much, Sprinkles?"

"Blow me, Moony."

"So it's true what they say about prison?"

"These will do, thank you," Dumbledore said, taking the conjured dolls and ignoring the fistfight breaking out in a Professor's quarters the day before classes resumed.

X

X

"Sirius!"

The man in question fell off the couch he'd been dozing on and glared up at Mooney. "What the hell do you want, you mangy asshole?"

"You have to come to lunch. I mean it. Get transformed. You *have* to see this."

Grumbling, Sirius transformed into Sprinkles and padded out with his friend.

X

X

Sirius had to be dragged back to Professor Lupin's quarters after the meal, since he was still in a daze. He transformed back into himself and lay back on the couch.

"Wow."

"Sirius."

"Just wow."

"Sirius!"

"She was a perfect knockout, Mooney. Damn. Dunno why she was sitting with Professor Dumbledore, but still. That was an outfit I designed for him she was wearing. Think I could go into business?"

"SIRIUS!"

"If she'd model for me, I'd make a fortune. And if she modeled for me in private... well, that'd be even better. You know what I mean, Mooney?"

"SPRINKLES!"

"What?"

"I've been waiting to tell you this."

"Mooney, I'm in my happy place right now, so get it out of your system."

"That was Professor McGonagall."

Sirius went silent. Finally he spoke. "Don't do this to me, man; that was *not* Professor McG. Don't you fuck with my boner by saying stuff like that."

"No, really. I was at the staff meeting when it was explained to us."

"But... but she... did you see the size of..."

"Yes, I did."

"Holy shit, man."

"What?"

"I was wrong about her name all these years."

"I'm going to regret asking: why?"

"It's Professor McDouble-Gs."

"I only hope to the gods that she can't read minds, because if she finds that in my head, I intend to make sure you die with me."

"What a way to go, man. Killed by a babe like that..."

"It's because of some outfit-prank thing that someone got her."

Sirius froze. "Oh."

"What did you do?"

X

X

Sirius held up the outfit he'd had stuffed away in his "Special Shack" and grinned at his godson. "You see this thing? It makes catgirls."

" What's a catgirl?"

" This'd make a great gift for Professor McG."

" Who?"

" Professor McGonagall."

" Oh." Hari had a pensive look on his face.

X

X

"Nothing, Mooney. I swear."

"You gave someone the idea for it, didn't you?" Lupin had his face in his hands and was shaking his head at the same time.

"Of course not," Sirius had sounding indignant down to an art form of sorts.

"She's going to kill the hell out of you if she finds out," Lupin declared.

"You think?"

"She's pretty livid, Sirius." Lupin looked up at his friend. "She actually asked your godson for a blade. I don't think I've ever been as disturbed (not counting when I found out that I was getting up to Professor McGonagall) as when he pulled out a small arsenal from that cloak and started giving her an explanation of the merits of the different shapes and lengths."

"What'd she pick?"

"I got the hell out of there. There were too many things wrong with that experience, Sirius. Never mind that I rather enjoyed a pretty bird considering blades—that's just being a werewolf. But getting turned on by Professor McGonagall doing that? No thank you. Plus, if she finds out that I know where you are and I didn't tell her about your part in this? She'll use whatever new blade she got to dismember me. Just be glad your godson somehow didn't tell her you're responsible for her predicament."

"He wouldn't do that; he's James's kid."

"Sirius. You saw him gut people. Do you really think he'd care about throwing you under the thestral?"

"Maybe Azkaban'd be willing to take me back?"

X

X

==oUT TAKE==

Hermione opened her eyes to see a swirling red gleam in the darkness. She'd been having enough trouble with settling into the newly vacated room that had been assigned to her. The nameplate on the outside had been obliterated by chipping and a crudely worked carving of her name was in its place. The room had also come fully furnished, including a collection of Sixth Year books—that had been nice at least.

Her scream was cut off by a hand over her mouth. "Time to get your training back up to par." Then something grabbed her hand and dragged her down the stairs to an empty Common Room. "Sit."

Hermione had just gotten up to go back to bed when Daphne Greengrass and a young, black-haired girl were hauled down the stairs and placed in seats. "Stay."

Moments later a harassed-looking Harry Potter and a sleep-tousled Blaise Zabini were towed into places. Hermione felt it was truly unfair that the boys looked more at home with this; Harry seemed as though he was more upset than tired and Blaise was somehow in the disheveled state that was handsome instead of messy.

"None of you will be needing these." Hari held up their wands.

(A/N Spoon 1)

John and I still haven't gotten the chance to go dinner and write, so you're still stuck with me commentating!

(A/N Spoon 2)

I'm sorry.

(A/N Spoon 3)

On another note, we see how Hari's adjusting to sage mode. Not well, apparently. He's a fast learner, but when you're going

faster than you can learn, it makes things difficult. He's also continuing to attempt to help and causing chaos just by doing so. Poor Hari.

(A/N Spoon 4)

On the other hand, Sirius is adjusting very well to McGonagall's new look. I think the exchange between him and Lupin is quite possibly my favorite in the last ten or so chapters. I just picture Sirius with a kind of zoned out stoner's voice and it makes it better still.

(A/N Spoon 5)

Also we see some of the clues that Hari will need to notice to really have it be hammered home that he's in an alternate dimension. Namely that Daphne and Astoria have swapped hair colors. There will be other minor natural differences (As opposed to Hermione not having shark teeth) as time goes on. For now though, they begin "relearning" the wonders of wandless magic.

(A/N Spoon 6)

Since A LOT of people seem to be confused, I will explain the Harry Potter/Hari Potter thing. In the outtakes, which are not canon (unlike omakes which are), for the past ten chapters, Hari has been in an alternate reality, summoned by a cliche manipulative Dumbledore to keep Harry Potter alive until Dumbledore is ready for him to be killed by Voldemort.

He is NOT Harry Potter. When referring to Harry Potter, it is that universe's Harry, as in a slightly more abused but otherwise original canon Harry.

If the outtakes continue to confuse you, I suggest just skipping down to the A/Ns when you see any form of ==OUTTAKE==.

Cat and Snake

Chapter 61: Cat and Snake

Professor McGonagall was not thrilled with her attire as she prepared to teach her first class since her... transformation. It was less revealing than just the bra and panties, but she had been unable to get Headmaster Dumbledore to explain where he'd gotten the outfit which consisted of a man's button-down white shirt with several buttons undone (though to be fair, that was necessary because of the size of her bust), a short and very tight skirt, thigh-high stockings whose tops were just barely covered by her skirt, and her damned heels. On the upside, she got to have her hair in her preferred severe bun. The fact that she was teaching the Seventh Year N.E.W.T. class (and Tam Weasley) was not pleasant-a bunch of hormonal boys was not going to be fun (and that didn't address the strangeness of having a twelve-year-old holding her own in the class. How *that* had happened was something that no one was willing to explain to her).

She had just walked into the room and was getting ready to start the lesson when her ears (her new ones, not the ones on the sides of her head) twitched as they picked up a murmured discussion at the back of the room.

"Who's the hot bird?" asked one boy.

"No idea, wish the old fart had introduced her at lunch," hissed back another.

"Damn sight more attractive than old McGonagall, though, ain't she?"

"Isn't anything?" interjected a third.

"This one tops Sinestra, though."

X

X

Tam watched as Professor McGonagall's eyes narrowed and tiny claws slipped from her nail-beds. It was uncanny just how much she looked like she had forty years ago. She'd swear not a day had passed since they were in Sixth Year. And that face was the one that meant she was getting very close to her limit of patience. Tam also had excellent hearing and could make out what was being said in the back rows.

"I wish she topped Sinestra."

"You and me both."

"Hey guys?"

"How big do you reckon those are?"

"Guys?"

"In my professional opinion: really nice."

"Guys!"

Tam dropped her ballpoint pen on the ground and ducked under her desk, absently transfiguring it into a concrete bunker which might be more difficult to retransmute in anger. She then started conjuring steel rebar to act as reinforcement.

"Think she'd be interested in a little 'after hours study'?"

"Of course she would: she's dressed like a slutty teacher."

Tam whimpered behind her defenses and began to conjure more material to absorb the incoming attacks. She had to keep shoving some of the other students away when they tried to join her-lessons with Professor Potter meant that most people in the upper years had a well-developed sense of self-preservation and awareness. The lot at the back of the class were apparently blinded by boobs.

When she found that there was something of a rush on her area, she began to transfigure the nearby desks to expand her network so that the rest of the class could also cower out of the line of fire, although they had yet to take the added precaution of lying flat on the ground.

X

X

Tam waited for the noise to die down before she poked her head out of cover (after using conjured mirrors to look beyond the confines of the magically created walls). It was an impressive level of damage that had been dealt out. Much of the back of the room had been transfigured into animals that were enthusiastically mauling the surprised males who were bereft of wands and trying to flee for their lives. The pair of fully-formed lions were especially impressive.

"Class dismissed, nyah," snapped Professor McGonagall.

As the students shuffled out, aside from the boys who were working to fend off their attackers by shoving one another to the forefront, she spoke again. "Miss Weasley." Tam froze, halfway out the door. "Good work on your bunker earlier. I'm impressed, nyah. And good work, protecting your fellow students from the crossfire."

"It was nothing, Minnikitty." A pause. "Oh shit."

X

X

Minerva's eyes went wide as she watched Tam Weasley flee down the hall as though the hounds of hell were after her. *No one* called her that. Well, excepting one person. Her eyes narrowed instead as she went to have words with the Headmaster.

X

X

"Headmaster!" Dumbledore looked up as his office door slammed open and a rather fit young woman with flashing green eyes and cat ears back against her skull stormed in, her lips curled back, revealing delicate fangs. "Tell me about Tam Weasley."

"Well, if you're asking in an official capacity, then I must insist that you remember that her legal name is Ginerva Weasley. Tam is a middle name she uses for other purposes. There was just no way I was dealing with the paperwork to fix that kind of thing."

"This is not an official inquiry."

"Oh. Then I have nothing to say on the matter. It's lovely to see you, Minerva."

"Don't you try that bullshit on me, Albus. I was just teaching my N.E.W.T. class-

"Dismissed early, I hear."

"And Miss Weasley called me a name that only one person has ever used." She frowned. "Not for a long time, too."

"How interesting."

"And I'm positive that person never mentioned the name. It's not the kind of thing that comes up in casual conversation. And even if it *did*, the Weasleys are not exactly the type who would have heard such conversation."

Dumbledore decided not to bother her with a response and pulled out some paperwork to fill out.

"So I want an explanation, Albus. No one should know that name." She glared when he just continued with his labors. "You know it broke my heart, Albus. I need to know what's going on." When there was no response, she tried not to reflect on paths not taken as she

had when she'd been in here years ago. And many times since then. "If you won't tell me, then..." She turned and stormed back out.

"It's good to see you Minerva," she heard behind her. "It's amazing, you look just like you did when you were finishing your time as a student here." She froze for a moment and then walked onwards.

X

X

"Hari?" Pansy had decided to ask about something that had been bothering her for several minutes. Moreover, no one else seemed to be interested in asking and so it was falling to her to find out.

"Yes?" Hari was eating his rice remarkably slowly-carefully operating chopsticks made of some sort of metal instead of his usual wooden ones.

"There's something different about you. I can't quite put my finger on it, but maybe it's that your skin *is fucking glowing gold?*" That was actually a something of a gross oversimplification. Hari's skin was not glowing exactly, but there was a definite golden hue to it that actually had the appearance of lightly pebbled leather as might be found on a lizard and when Pansy looked at him out of the corer of her eye, the gold was sometimes more of an emerald green. The entire effect was strangely subtle, a faint tinge somehow under the normal pale. Besides, there were other things to catch the eye; Hari appeared to be wearing a narrow band of kohl and Pansy was sure that his posture was a bit different. Also there was his hair. Along the top of his head, off center to his right was a shock of brilliant red that turned to white at the end of his ponytail.

"Well, you seem to have spotted it." Hari continued eating slowly.

"Well?"

Daphne coughed. "Hari: *why* are you gold?"

"Ah. Experiment went right. Now I just need to relearn how to move."

"Is that all?"

"Yep."

Daphne turned to Pansy. "See?" she said with false cheer. "Nothing to worry about."

Pansy shook her head and looked like her hand was reaching for her gun before remembering that Hari wouldn't get hit anyway and gritted her teeth. "Right. Nothing to worry about."

x

x

Tam swallowed nervously and knocked on the door. There were so many ways this meeting could go and she had reviewed them over and over in her head, working out how to avoid getting caught after that slip-up in class. It was just too easy for her to forget that it had been fifty years for her.

"Enter." The voice was different than she'd had in the memories of Ginny Weasley, but in her own memories, it sounded exactly the same. Inside the office, Professor McGonagall was sitting at her desk with two pieces of parchment in front of her and an expression of predatory intent on her face. "Sit, nyah." And looking so very same and yet... she would *never* have dressed like that.

Tam sat. "What seems to be the problem, M-Professor McGonagall?" She was glad of her occlumency shields because there was a prodding at her mind from the allure. It was hard enough not to stare without that.

There was a flicker of emotion that faded. "Miss Weasley, you turned in a most remarkable piece of homework recently."

"I'm sure what ever it was I did correctly, Professor." Tam wondered what homework could have prompted a meeting. She was Tam Riddle and her work was exemplary. She was top of the class because she would accept nothing less, even Hermione didn't have a competitive streak this severe.

"My face is up here, Miss Weasley. Nyah."

"They're rather... attention grabbing, Professor McGonagall." Tam pulled her gaze away from the truly massive rack and up at the pretty face of the young-faced McGonagall.

"Thank you. The thing about the homework is that I found it rather familiar and so I looked back through the archives and found that Professor Dumbledore once graded a similar paper, nyah."

Tam's face was suddenly expressionless. "Really?"

"Yes. By Tom Riddle." Tam stayed poker-faced. "By 'similar' I mean to say 'identical'. Nyah."

"I hate to admit it, Professor, but I had Fred and George help me by stealing an old essay. I just didn't feel like doing the work." Tam lied with the ease of being Lord Voldemort in another life. No one had suspected him except for Dumbledore. The silver tongue still came easily to her.

"The thing is, Riddle, that the handwriting is identical, nyah."

"Well, I did use a duplication charm on it." Tam hadn't seen that coming-she had genuinely expected that her handwriting would be different. This was going south quickly.

"Without accessing the file, too, nyah. I did check when it was last retrieved."

"Perhaps it was parallel development?" Tam offered, wondering if she dared memory charm Minerva. She couldn't though. Not her.

There'd been enough damage done.

"I see. Nyah." McGonagall's youthful face had a scowl on it that Tam found endearingly familiar. "Dismissed."

Tam rose and walked to the door. As she stepped out, she turned back for a moment. "For what it's worth: I'm sorry." She'd made it about a dozen feet outside, replaying the conversation in her head when she froze. *Shit!* "Well-played, Minikitty."

X

X

"Albus!" Professor McGonagall's snarling face appeared around the stack of paperwork that Dumbledore was working on. "We have a problem."

"We do indeed, Minerva. Do you realize how much we're spending in potions these days? I'm going to need to raise the prices for those who can afford it to keep us stocked."

"Tom Riddle is wandering around the castle!"

"Oh that."

"YOU KNEW?"

"Well she did come to me straight after it happened." Dumbledore pushed some paperwork aside and motioned for McGonagall to sit down on a chair.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" she demanded. "Why didn't you tell *me*? You know I would want to know!"

"For one thing, it wasn't important for you to know. Ginny Weasley got possessed by a dark artifact towards the end of last year and Miss Riddle is the result of it."

"Why haven't you done anything about it?"

"About what? Miss Weasley isn't in there being controlled or anything. Young Miss Riddle seems to have gained a better understanding of how to function in society. And I did make it an executable offense to be Lord Voldemort in my school. I will say that being exposed to a loving family will no doubt have wondrous curative effects over time."

"Nothing can redeem Tom Riddle." She turned and stormed out of the room.

X

X

==oUT TAKE==

The next morning there was a good deal of whispering going on in the Great Hall as people took note of the vastly shrunken contingent in green. And of the new wearers of the color. Hermione Granger and Harry Potter were both clad in green-and-silver ties and being frog-marched by a boy in a cloak with red clouds on it who was looking around the room with a single red eye.

"Before anyone asks," said Hari. "Yes, it's magical pink eye." There was no reaction.

Finally someone spoke. "That doesn't exist."

"Really?" Hari cocked his head. "Oh. In that case it's an eye that lets me control your mind."

"Bullshit," called someone from Hufflepuff.

"Believe what you want." Hari forced the two onto the bench for Slytherin after using a foot to give Draco Malfoy a kick to the side that sent him skidding along the wood leaving scorch-marks in his wake and shoving a Fifth Year off the bench at the end.

"When my father hears about this..." began the boy.

"I won't give a fuck. Now shut up or I'll pull your tongue out through your anus." Hari was not in a good mood after discovering that the people he'd already trained were so incredulous that he'd spent the night making them damn sure that wandless magic was, in fact, a thing. He'd probably be back to his usual self sooner or later, but he was also annoyed to find out that his idiot other-self had taken Divination and Magical Creatures, as those were even useful for anything. "Sit. Eat. Shut up," he ordered his captive pupils.

X

X

Snape looked up into the red gaze of the monster they'd hired.
"Other-Professor Snape, I need to speak with you about a class schedule change for your new house member."

(A/N John)

Guess who's back!

(A/N 2 John)

It's been a long time coming and I'm not quite right, given how my writing in the next chapter is, but it's good to be back in the saddle. You lot have been stuck with Spoon's crazed ramblings for too long.

(A/N 3 John)

Instead you can have *my* crazed ramblings. Speaking of which, this chapter lays out some groundwork for future chapters that are the fault of something that turned out not to be the one-off joke I had expected it to be. Yeah. Go figure, me having something spiral out of control; that's new.

(A/N 4 John)

On the other hand, the next chapter is a bit chaotic as we try to get things done. There's honestly only so much more to do Third Year, but we're working on it. It turned out we front-loaded it pretty heavily since we're at around 80k words for just Third Year, so go figure. It'll be nice to get on to other things though, since I have so much stuff waiting for Fourth Year.

(A/N 5 John)

I realize this has been less topical than usual (I thought we'd try an ingested method?) but I'm in need to venting a bit of randomness. Like the next chapter. Ciao.

Tam's Tribulations

Chapter 62: Tam's Tribulations

... in Which a Prank is Played.

"What's wrong, Tam?" Daphne had looked up from her frustrated attempts to get a book to turn into a lump of coal without using the fireplace in time to see Tam come in with more open emotion on her face than she could recall ever being there.

"Nothing." Tam's voice was even more toneless than usual, almost evasive instead of merely guarded.

"Bullshit." Tracy had spotted the exchange and decided to weigh in.

"Then let me rephrase," Tam's voice was now cold and there was an almost hollow, metallic quality to it. "Fuck off." For the first time, the Common Room wasn't only slightly wary of Tam but was in a state of pants-shitting terror; her red eyes were suddenly horrifying and the fact that the dark voice had come out of a fresh-faced twelve-year-old didn't help them calm.

"Would you please keep it down?" snapped Hari, who was sitting in the corner that was still decorated by his rune-networks. Over the last few hours, the various colors and patterns of his skin had faded almost completely so that it was barely visible, although the kohl around his eyes had stayed, as had his new, slightly changed posture. Also, his hair still had the shock of red-to-white going through it. A single pebble was whirling around him in an unsteady orbit and had begun to glow from air-friction. His scowl was far more terrifying than Tam at the moment because no matter how scary Tam *might* be, Hari was a known horror and they were pretty sure that Tam would never manage to be worse than that.

Tam smiled thinly and stormed up to her room-as a Second Year, she still had a private room. She intended to politely explain to Dumbledore that anyone who tried anything on her in a private room later on would deserve whatever she did, reformed or not, and therefore she would *not* be sharing.

Once Tam was gone (and several people had also left, walking awkwardly-Draco Malfoy wasn't among them) Hermione turned to Hari. "What are you doing, anyway?" Hari didn't answer aside from glaring at the white circle wobbling around him. "Okay then." She paused. "Do you have a wand you want me to hit you with?" The pebble melted a hole in the ceiling as Hari started to laugh.

"I'm working on my control."

"You're what." Hermione was using Daphne's toneless-question technique. Then she remembered whom she was dealing with. "Why are you working on your control?"

"It seems to have... slipped recently." Hari pulled a pebble from his pocket with ostentatious care and set it to orbiting him. "I wasn't *trying* to make a stone-melting weapon." He stopped. "Although the fact that I can is definitely an interesting one that I shall keep in mind for future use."

"Is that why it's wobbling?"

"Pretty much."

Hermione stared up at the ceiling in thought.

"At the risk of asking a silly question," said Pansy, looking up from her book. "Does it slipping have anything to do with your makeover?"

"Why would you think that?" asked Blaise.

"Just guessing that the two might be linked." She stopped talking as a thought occurred to her. "Oh no."

"And on that note," Daphne said brightly, "I'm declaring this discussion ended." The upper years were busily studying a book a Muggleborn had brought in about SWAT tactics and hadn't been listening since Tam left the room and so didn't object. The younger students had learned that the word of Hari's circle was law—normally Daphne was the only one to bother actually trying to keep things organized. And these days, Tracy and Millie seemed to be up to something.

Speaking of which... Tracy came barreling into the room with a sheaf of lined notebook paper and another of what looked like pencil sketches. She came to a screeching halt in front of Hari and stepped back until the heat from the new orbiting rock was no longer quite so intense. "Hari, is there any chance that I can get you to do some rune-designs for me? For pay?"

Hari, whose eyes had been staring straight ahead, blinked. "For pay? No. I will take ten percent."

"Seven."

"Fifteen."

"Hari?" whispered Daphne, "you're supposed to lower the number you say during negotiations... and I really need to know what this is about at some point."

"Not how my Uncles taught me. Fifteen." He grinned. "Or do you think someone else can do what you want to do?"

"Fifteen it is."

"Good write up the proposal and send it to this address." He handed her a small card with an address on it. "You'll need to provide the actual prototypes, of course." He rose. "Of course I'll just need a place to put that series of experi..." he trailed off. "Sonofabitch!" There was a sound of leather-on-leather and then a pile of rubble

formed from part of a Common Room wall from which Hari began to extract himself.

"Tracy, what is Hari doing for you?" Daphne asked.

"You don't want to know, Daph. Trust me on this."

"If it involves Hari, you might be right. No one will die though, right?"

"Nah."

Hari had, meanwhile, slowly made his way out of the Common Room, muttering about how he could have missed so obvious a location.

X

X

Tam coughed when Hari sat down next to her. "I recognize that smell," she hissed so as not to be more overheard than usual in the Great Hall. "Why were you in the Chamber?"

"Well," Hari was picking his way through a breakfast of rice and cold fish. "It's a huge, open space made of sturdy material and no one is using it. So I thought I might take charge of it and have more space for things that can go boom. Besides, there's no snake down there, so it's kind of worthless right now otherwise."

"And other than the two of us, who else could even get there?"

"I've been meaning to ask: how did you get down there. You don't speak Parseltongue, right?"

"Parsel-what?" Hari thought for a moment. "Oh, snake-talking? Maybe? My Uncle can. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"It's how you get in."

"It is?" Hari blinked at Tam. "You sure? I don't remember needing it."

"Yes!"

"Evidence suggests you might be wrong about this."

"Of course I am. I should have known. Laws of magic don't apply to you."

"Well, as a rule, I'm not *supposed* to obey laws much of the time. It'd get in the way of my job, so why should magic be any different? Speaking of the snake," Hari went on, apparently unaware of his abrupt change in topic, "last night, Sprinkles told Not-Professor Werewolf about you unleashing a Basilisk and they're planning to deal with that later today."

"What."

"Well, they were talking and he mentioned it and..."

"How did a dog tell anyone anything? It's not like it could have been via barks; last night wasn't a full moon even if Werewolves could speak dog-which they can't."

"Humans speak English just fine, right? Well, Sprinkles is a not-animal who is also supposedly your former right hand, only he's really just a pussy."

"You mean to say you had Sirius Black on a leash?"

"I had *Sprinkles* on a leash. Sirius Black is just some guy Sprinkles turns into sometimes," replied Hari primly.

"We need to deal with this!"

"Deal with this?"

"Confund and then modify their memories."

"Oh. Alright. They're not yet coming down for breakfast anyways. Oh wait, Not-Professor is, but Sprinkles is staying upstairs."

"Let's go."

X

X

Remus Lupin had just turned the corner, exiting the Teacher's Wing, when the world went dark for him.

X

X

"That's both their memories modified," Tam said.

"You're really good at that," Hari mused.

"Legilimency helps."

"Oh yeah. I need to work on that some more."

"I don't even want to know why this is something you're spending time on."

"Reading minds can be useful?"

"Fair enough."

"Anyways, now that we've done that..." Hari waved a hand and clothes tore themselves from the sleeping figures and scattered themselves in tatters around the room. "Let's get to work." He began to arrange the two nude men on the bed and occasionally stepped back to view the scene and then make a few adjustments until he was satisfied that they were positioned properly.

"What are you doing?"

"What Uncle Tobi taught me should be done." Hari pulled a few bottles of whiskey from somewhere and began to splash the bedding liberally with it as well as the faces of the sleeping men, swishing a bit in their mouths for full effect. "Go get a camera. We might one day wish to blackmail these two. Go on," he prodded when Tam stayed put. "Get a camera. I'll finish up here."

Tam took one more wide-eyed glance at the way Hari was now moving furniture and doing careful damage to maximize the impression made.

X

X

Classes were canceled later that day due to severe damage to the eardrums of nearly every occupant of the castle. Aside from Hari, only Daphne Greengrass was still able to hear and so the Hospital Wing was kept busy with repair-work. The source of the twin screams of shock and terror were never announced.

X

X

"It *has* to be a prank, Mooney," insisted Sirius. "There is just no way that we'd have done anything like that."

"Am I the only one who noticed the number of whiskey bottles lying around the bed, Sprinkles? We could have been so blind-drunk that you thought I was Lucinda Fansgragle."

"But really, even blind drunk, I'd have never let anything be up my ass."

"Speaking of Lucinda..." murmured Lupin. "If I recall correctly you did mention something about that after..."

"You remember her, right?" demanded Sirius. "If a girl like that asks to shove a finger up your bum, you ask her if she's sure she only wants to use one. I mean damn."

"Still, you *did*..."

"You, my friend, could not pass for her even if I were drunk. You don't have the right equipment," Sirius made grasping gestures in front of his chest. "And unless you are very, very tiny, you could not possibly be as small as her finger was."

Lupin gave his friend a huge grin. "You'd know the difference. It'd be like a Thestral had been back there."

"Thanks, Mooney. I needed that image."

"Any time, Sprinkles."

"But that only goes to show that it can't have been real. I mean, I know magic helps us heal, but I don't think it would have been that fast. I mean, Jackie Appleton didn't recover for a week after I had a shot at her..."

"You and the rest of the school, mate."

"Even you, Mooney?"

"Yeah. She liked the danger. And well..."

"You know something, I don't want to know how you planned to finish that statement."

"Probably for the best. Nevertheless, I think I'm swearing off the booze for the moment."

"While you do that, I'm going to Madam Broth's House of Good Repute to feel excessively manly and straight for a while."

"Then you'll want to avoid Lady Poison, Sprinkles."

"The one with the massive knockers?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Trust me on this, Sprinkles."

X

X

==ouTTAKE==

"Potter." Professor Babbling looked very confused to see Harry Potter sitting next to Hermione in her class. "What are you doing here?"

Harry glanced at the dark-haired boy on his other side. "I'm transferring in," he said. "I thought it would be good to learn about Runes."

The Professor stared at him for a moment and then shrugged. It wasn't like Harry Potter ever really got in trouble for some of the crazier shit he pulled, so why should she argue if he was doing something that made sense to her for once? It was probably easier to leave it be anyway.

As class went on, she kept staring at the other new student in her class. He was supposedly Potter's new bodyguard, but the boy didn't look any older than his charge. There was something really disconcerting about that. Also, he didn't seem to be paying much attention to the class-she guessed that shouldn't surprise her, but the fact that he had out some sort of not-quill and not-parchment and was busily scribbling something that had the occasional Egyptian rune in it was getting to her because she couldn't tell what the rest of the symbols were. She resolved to ask him about that after class.

When class ended, she went to ask the boy what it was he'd been writing, only to notice that he had vanished along with Potter and Granger. At least she knew that Granger was gone because she was using a Time-Turner (and wasn't *that* a crazy use of runes?), but Potter was a bit stranger.

X

X

"How did you get here?" hissed Hermione to the boy who had kidnapped her and her best friend from their House as they stepped into Arithmancy.

"Walked." Hari didn't understand why she had trouble with this. It was only the other side of the castle and hardly much of a run for him through secret passages.

"We went through time!" she kept her voice low (and Harry was looking a little unwell, apparently magical time travel counted as magical travel to his stomach).

"I walked fast."

"Gah!"

"Hi Daphne, Pansy, Tracy," Hari greeted his friends who glared at him in confused condemnation. "Harry, come sit with our friends." He forced the boy (and Hermione by extension) to sit with the other Slytherins. "Now say hello to the Professor."

(A/N John)

So we're running late because I've been cooking dinner a lot and that means we don't spend that time writing. I'm going to try to change that a bit soon, since I miss this.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, we're coming up on the end of Third Year. With Pettigrew out of the way, there's not that much left to do.

(A/N 3 John)

Knowing me, that means about four or five chapters. We'll see.

(A/N 4 John)

And yes, this chapter is a bit on the short side. The next one is less so, but sometimes there are transitional things that need to be done. It happens.

(A/N 5 John)

And I don't seem to be making a bunch of jokes here. I'll work on that too.

Revenge is a Dish Best Served in a Thong

Chapter 63: Revenge is a Dish Best Served in Skimpy Lingerie

... Or Dear Merlin My Eyes

The following months were comparatively quiet for the Third Year Slytherins. Of course they were in close proximity to Hari, so that was a relative description. Blaise had finally begun the sleepless portion of his training, having been long-since left in the dust by Tam who spent the evenings trying to understand how Hari had managed to create the rune schema he kept giving her to help him evaluate. He felt it was lucky that Hari had this distraction, as it would otherwise have involved him being in a great deal more discomfort instead of being forced to meditate and then try to levitate a pebble.

Hari's magical control was slowly returning, but there was a period during February of almost a week during which Flitwick didn't just assume Hari had done whatever it was that the class was covering. That was, admittedly, countered to a degree by Hari's complete over-completion of the task at hand. When they did a review of levitation, Hari put a hole through the ceiling and all the way out the roof. Four floors up. With the feather.

It took him as long as it did to begin regaining proper control because he had prioritized restoration of his motor skills (Professor Headmaster had sent him a short note saying that while he did not care what it was that Hari had done to himself to result in holes in his castle's walls, he should please stop doing it). He was now walking normally and had begun to use wooden chopsticks instead of reinforced metal ones.

Most of the school was already used to him vanishing for days at a time and then turning up for a meal without apparently noticing that time had passed-this was judging from him picking up conversations that had been going on when he disappeared. Even Remus Lupin

was slowly coming to terms with the fact that Professor Dumbledore was okay with this despite no explanation being made available when he asked the man about it.

Lupin was also dealing with Snape. It seemed that revenge was the order of the day (after day after day) and so he found himself regularly receiving frilly panties and other things that the dungeon bat made clear a proper woman should have. And then there were the sex toys. So many of them. The only comfort there was that he got to imagine the awkwardness of Severus Snape in a sex-shop where, no doubt, everyone's libido died a terrible death. On the other hand, Sirius couldn't stop laughing every time Snape's owl landed in Lupin's quarters with another package.

There was also the continually growing pile of lingerie from students that Lupin was desperately trying to figure out how to get rid of permanently. He had taken to vanishing the stuff, but he kept worrying that someone would report this and aurors would kick down his door and do bad things to him. It didn't help that Sirius didn't seem to see the problem with this situation, at least as far as the Seventh Years were concerned-although he did offer the possibility that this was a separate, elaborate prank which Lupin was sorely hoping for at this point.

The only child of the Marauders continued to baffle him by simply ignoring convention when it didn't suit him. None of the Marauders had ever managed to get away with that, but Hari somehow regularly left the school for a day or more to go on some sort of unspecified trip and no one seemed to care. For that matter, the boy's teaching technique was pretty terrifying too. Every time he came back from his "rabbit issue" as Sirius call- used to call it, he had to find that the House Elves were finishing cleaning up various humors from his classroom.

His students worried him too, especially the oldest and youngest. The N.E.W.T. students were often eager to get into law enforcement or other lethal careers and the First Years were far too malleable to be allowed near Hari Potter.

In the meantime, he was going to do something about Severus.

X

X

Severus Snape had his wand out when he entered his chambers, having already detected that someone was in them who wasn't supposed to be. He nearly vomited when he discovered on his couch the form of Remus Lupin in a pose last seen in muggle smut magazines and wearing some definitely frilly bits of lace.

"What in the flying fuck are you doing here, Lupin?"

"Well," said Remus in falsetto and a demure look down, "I thought with all the things you'd sent me that you wanted me to wear them for you." He pressed his wrists together in a manner that would have had delightful effect should he have been female. "Do you like it?"

"How... how did you possibly... what gave you that impression?"
Snape was paler than usual. This was insane even by the standard of Hogwarts-even by the standard of Hari Potter and Hogwarts.

"Well, why else would you send me these?" Lupin picked at the string thong. "I mean, what purpose is there in sending me such pretty things?" He paused. "I feel pretty wearing this."

"What?"

"You know my inner wolf likes you, Severus," Remus went on.
"You're its mate."

"I'm what?"

"Don't worry, I'll make sure it doesn't hurt too much!" Snape's wand snapped down and held Remus under a mildly illegal pain curse.
"But darling, we don't have a safe word yet!"

Snape's eyes widened and he turned and fled.

After a moment, Lupin fell off the couch laughing. It had been so worth dressing up like this in order to see Snape's face. He was going to have that image made into a wizarding photo and give a copy to Sirius. Werewolf mates; that was absurd.

X

X

By the time March rolled around, Remus Lupin was no longer receiving "gifts" from Snape. He had also put the picture of Snape up in his classroom where it was suitably horrified whenever he entered the room. Totally worth it. Especially when it was trying to claw its eyes out. He strongly suspected that Sirius had pranked the picture somehow to let it do that, but it amused him anyway.

Profesor McGonagall was also adapting to her new reality in a slow way. Coming to accept it would be a more realistic way to describe it. Her classes (Third Year and up) seemed to either pay rapt attention to her or be impossibly distracted. She'd taken to hexing those that seemed not to be listening and so far it was having some small results, but she chose to take the good with the bad and enjoy that many of her students were now paying more attention; she was especially glad that they did so when she was giving the safety instructions (that was another nice thing: her most inattentive students tended to hurt themselves with badly applied magic, so that was another upside).

On the other hand, there was nothing she could do about Riddle. She was as coldly distant as she could be without drawing too much attention to the matter. She was certain that Dumbledore wouldn't back her up if she went to the aurors and that might not have stopped her if it weren't so hard to actually *prove* that it was Riddle. And then she would need to explain who Riddle was and how she knew. She didn't want to have that become widely known either. Bad enough that it had happened, but to have people know... and now that she looked like she did then... She kept catching the girl watching her without any feeling on her face.

It didn't help that Riddle was genuinely brilliant. Whether it was related to spending time with that menace Potter or not, she was discovering more and more that the mind of Riddle was incredible and was being forced to consider things from new angles. How much good could he have done if he weren't an unfeeling monster?

She'd tried to convince Dumbledore that Riddle had to go and had been rebuffed. The statement that Riddle had reformed was given without supporting reasons and she was truly at a loss for why Dumbledore was allowing that... thing to wander the castle (although the fact that he spent so much time in the company of the most dangerous person on staff was a mildly mitigating factor). McGonagall had even threatened to leave and Dumbledore had laughed in her face and then reminded her of her contract.

It was utterly infuriating too, that she was once again in possession of a massive chest. She had gone out of her way to get that shrunk down as the 'side effect' of a ritual. After all that effort, to have them back to the size they'd been was just rubbing salt in the wound, reminding her of... that was the point in her thinking that she generally went and downed a bottle of scotch in her chambers. Even during the day.

X

X

"Hari." Hermione had stormed over to the 'Hari' section of the Common Room, which was now filled with a new layer of scribbles over his previous project.

"Yes?" Hari didn't look up from the book he was writing in.

"Is that a Library book?"

"Yes."

"You're writing in it!" she snapped.

"It's wrong," he said. "So I figured I'd fix the math errors in the Arithmancy tables."

"You shouldn't be writing in Library books!" She paused. "Actually, you should be under attack by the book, come to think of it. Madam Pince enchanted the books to hurt people who write in them." The book twitched in Hari's grip as he crossed out a line. "Are you pinning that book down while you write in it?"

"Yes, Hermione. Is there something you wanted?"

"Gah!" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. At one time, she'd have chewed her lip to try and get some focus, but thanks to the boy in front of her, she couldn't give in to that nervous habit anymore. She rather liked having her face unperforated. "Actually, there is; it's the beginning of June! I've waited six months now; why haven't you thanked me for your Christmas present?"

"Thanked you for your what?" Hari blinked. "Is that what the packages in my room are?" Draco Malfoy was already safely hidden behind Crabbe when the book went flying and so it slammed into the chair he'd been sitting in. "I haven't actually been in my room recently..." Hari trailed off.

Hermione's mouth opened. Then it closed. She scowled, shaking her head and clearly trying to adjust once more to the world of Hari Potter. "You haven't been in your room in six months?"

"Once or twice, but I was busy."

"Hari."

"Mm?"

"Go open your presents."

"I'm busy." Hari turned a struggling page and continued his vandalism.

"Now, Hari."

Deciding that it would be less trouble to just go open them-besides, he supposed he really should open them; after getting his friends things, it was only fair that he thank them for their gifts; he considered the fact that they didn't thank him sometimes as being a minor detail. The spirit of Christmas involved being thankful or something. He hadn't been paying enough attention. He drew a kunai and speared the book through the spine, ramming the point into the stone floor. Then he rose and walked out of the Common Room.

Hermione stared at the weakly twitching book, amazed that Hari had listened to her.

X

X

Hari stared at the haul for this year. Of all things, Hermione had gotten him some basic books on Runes and Arithmancy and left post-it notes in them marking the rules of magic his projects violated and asking him to please update the books-considering that, he wondered why she was so unhappy he was fixing the book in the Common Room. On the other hand, Blaise had given him a tanto that turned him invisible and according to the note, did so by being so sharp it cut light. He swapped out the tanto on his shoulder for the new one with a grin. Pansy's was a set of dress robes and included a request that if he barged into a party again, he could at least be dressed for the occasion. Millie sent twenty-percent of her take from her summer job. Girl-Tobi had given him a rubber vampire mask-he thought it was sweet of her to want him to be able to look like Uncle Tobi. Tracy's gift was some sort of new gun from Lazlo which apparently he thought Hari might enjoy being the test-user for. From Tam was a collection of rune schema she had never been able to test because they might be dangerous and she figured that he seemed to be able to test unsafe runes, so he could play with them if he wanted. Lastly, Daphne had provided a collection of magical

doodads for him to take apart in the hopes he might do that and not bother her. That probably hadn't worked.

X

X

==outTAKE==

In his exploration of other-Hogwarts, Hari came across an odd room filled with more junk than he'd seen in the whole castle. It also made his head hurt to see a virtually infinite space stretching away from him in all directions, but there was some seriously cool stuff in there. He resolved to never tell Uncle Kakuzu about all the gems he'd spotted; he wasn't sure if he could even seal that many. And even if he could... he spent a couple hours finding out that yes, he could seal all of them.

He also found an angry tiara. It kept trying to kill him until he bashed it against the wall a few times. He was going to destroy it when he realized what it looked like and decided he had a better use for it.

"Hey, not-Tam!" The Gryff Common Room went tense and silent at the sound of That Voice. Ginny looked up to see the red-eyed gaze of the boy who'd turned the area into a charnel house. "Here!" He dropped something on her head and everything went red. Then there was more red spinning in front of her.

"Hi, Tam."

"Hari." Tam looked around. "This is unexpected. You have made another me?"

"Well, I needed someone who understands the world."

"How did you make another me? It's not like there were spare Ginny Weasleys lying around."

"About that..."

"How did you find an... alternate dimension. That's new." Tam turned. "Hey Fred, hey Fred; I think we should have a little talk." She paused. "Can you get Ron and Per..." she looked at Hari again. "You killed my brother?"

"No. I defenestrated him. He didn't land properly. All my students his age would have at least survived."

Tam sighed. "I have some explaining to do, don't I?"

(A/N John)

Guess what? We managed to write! Woo!

(A/N 2 John)

Also, next chapter finally ends Third Year. I've been looking forwards to this for months now. I have so much stuff planned for Fourth Year and onwards.

(A/N 3 John)

And once again, some bit of fluff mutated into a plot-monster. Be prepared for there to be actual plot and character development as we go forwards.

(A/N 4 John)

With luck, we will get more writing done soon.

It's Happening Again

Chapter 64: It's Happening Again

... or the End of Year Three

"Mister Potter?" Professor Lupin's voice was somewhat hesitant. Part of this was because he was asking a question important to his remaining friend, part because this thirteen-year-old always made him nervous, and part because the boy was currently honing a very large sword at the breakfast table.

Hari didn't look up from the claymore he was using as a test piece. He was quite interested in finding out how to replicate the effect of Blaise's gift and the first step was some experimentation. "Yes, not-Professor Werewolf?"

Lupin twitched a little. "I need to ask you a question."

"Alright." Hari gave the sword one more run with the stone he'd been using and then set that aside in exchange for a rag and some vials that, when he uncorked the first one, smelled like horrifyingly potent corrosives. Lupin felt the hairs inside his nose beginning to smoulder.

"Well, I'm more passing a question along. Sprinkles wants to know why you returned the firebolt."

Hari began to use an acid wash on the blade. "No idea." He paused. "I don't remember doing that."

"You did, though. He's most upset and spending a good bit of his time at the bottom of a bottle." Pause. "A bottle anyway. I don't think it's the same one unless he finally got an everfilled enchantment laid on it."

"When did I return this?"

"Well, it got back to him about a week ago now. I'm not sure, but he might be more upset that you didn't even look at it. I mean, I know the company makes sure they automatically return to the sender if unopened long enough, but that kind of hurts..."

"Um... not-Professor Werewolf?" interjected Hermione. "Was this by any chance a Christmas present?"

"How did you know, Miss Granger?" That acid was really strong, he could now feel wax dribbling from his ears and his sinuses draining.

"Because it was only yesterday that Hari actually looked at those. And only because I prodded him." She shook her head. "I think he's waiting to thank us until someone points out that he didn't do that either." A moment's consideration brought about the follow up of: "or he might not realize he hasn't."

"Definitely possible," added Tracy. "The more he does with Runes, the more absentminded he seems to get about everything else."

"Oh. That will definitely make Sprinkles feel better about it. Sort of. I'll go get it for you." Lupin gratefully scurried away before his eyeballs could melt.

"I don't really need a firebolt," commented Hari. "I can already make those when I want." He seemed oblivious to the shocked and horrified looks from the rest of the table at the idea that he could make the most secret broom on the market. He pulled an engraving tool from a pocket and began to etch something nearly invisibly small into the point of the weapon.

Twenty minutes later, Lupin came back with a long, broom-shaped package the contents of which everyone wondered about. No one was sure what could possibly be inside. "Here you go. I'll let Sprinkles know you got it."

"Okay." Hari levitated it beside him and continued with the careful work of carving into an ancient sword appropriated from one of the

suits of armor (which had been smart enough not to fight back and instead now just looked dejected-or as dejected as a suit of armor could manage).

"Hari?" Daphne asked after finishing her breakfast. "Mind if I open that and find out what it is?"

"Sure." Hari didn't look up still as the wrapping paper was torn free and was followed by a series of gasps.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," said Pansy, "but how did your dog afford a very expensive broom?" She stopped for a moment. "And why was it drinking?"

"Maybe it steals a lot of money?" offered Hari. "How should I know? It ran away anyways."

Tam covered her face with her hands. On the upside, this was easier than dealing with the continual death-glare from McGonagall. Life had been easier as an evil bastard.

X

X

The Slytherins returned to the Common Room warily; Hari hadn't been seen all day and so they were waiting for the other shoe to drop. After several years, they worried far more when Hari wasn't in sight. Thus is was that they returned to find that Hari's corner of insanity had been redone so that it now was filled with little rune-circles with various-sized bits of wood in them.

Of all people, it was Draco Malfoy who first worked out what they were seeing. "YOU TOOK IT APART?" His voice cracked and went higher as he shouted, unable not to vocalize his horror. When the rest of Slytherin just looked at him, he pointed an accusatory finger in Hari's direction and went on, "the Firebolt! He took it apart!" There was an expression on his face that said he couldn't understand how

these people could be so plebian that they didn't share his indignation. It was remarkable, since he had otherwise gotten pretty laid back about the whole idea of superiority, but this was apparently too close to his heart.

"How else am I supposed to find out how come it's the best?" Hari asked mildly as he placed another twig into a circle and watched the resulting runes scrawl themselves on the wall beside him. "So far, it seems pretty amateur."

Malfoy's pale face went red and his mouth opened, clearly about to begin a truly vitriolic rant about the matter before he stopped. "Are you going to make a better one?" his question was asked quite mildly.

"It shouldn't be hard." Hari made a note on the wall.

Malfoy twitched for a moment and the Slytherins began to wonder if he was about to get himself killed. "I want to invest." Or not.

"You what?"

"I want to invest in your company. Your brooms are going to be huge and I want to get in on that."

"Oh." Hari didn't look up. "Sure."

"HEY!" Millie and Tracy shouted.

Draco ignored them. "Do you have production sorted out yet?"

"Nope."

"Right." Malfoy thought to himself for a moment, waving Millie and Tracy into silence. "Alright. When you get the broom worked out, just let me know and I'll get it sorted out." He turned to the girls. "Now stop complaining and come with me so we can get some contracts drawn up. Or do you two know about running enterprises?" While

they were still stunned, he grabbed them by the wrists and began towing them from the room.

"What just happened?" hissed Pansy.

"Damned if I know," said Hari. "I think someone is about to make me more money." He made some more notes.

For the next several weeks, Millicent, Tracy, and Malfoy were seen in each other's company, heads down and muttering and making scribbles on a piece of parchment.

X

X

"I'll be back tomorrow," Hari announced at breakfast one morning. He hadn't spoken for almost a week, which had left everyone on edge. This was disturbingly unworrying after that length of time.

"Um, Hari?" Hermione began, "tonight is the full moon."

"Mm?" Hari didn't look up from his rice.

"You have classes to teach today."

Hari paused for a moment. "Good point. Give me your time-turner at dinner." Hermione's fork clattered onto the floor. The rest of the group stared in a mix of confusion and horror, depending on their knowledge of the subject. "That way I'll be back in time to teach and you'll never know."

"H-how did..." Hermione stopped herself. "You're Hari Potter, of course you know."

"Who on earth gave you a time-turner?" demanded Daphne.

"No one!" Hermione snapped, forgetting her earlier statement. "I don't have a time-turner!"

"I should have seen it," Daphne replied, ignoring the denial. "How else are you taking all those classes at the same time?"

"Hari!" Hermione hissed. "It was supposed to be a secret." Daphne huffed a little at being ignored herself.

"Then maybe you should have told me?" he suggested.

"Then it *wouldn't* be a secret!"

"As opposed to now?"

"Gah!" She whirled on Pansy, who was snickering. "STOP LAUGHING!"

"He has a good point." Daphne's voice was mild. "So who gave you one? Wait. This is totally off-the-wall insane. It wasn't Hari, right? So that leaves Albus Dumbledore."

"She's right, isn't she?" Pansy said. Without waiting for confirmation, she turned to Blaise. "Remember how I said the man was going mad? Still totally true."

"You're what, fourteen?" pointed out Daphne. "Isn't it really dangerous to travel through time at your age?"

Hari stood up. "I'll see you tonight and then in class." As he walked out of the Great Hall, a discussion had begun in his wake regarding the safety of time travel for pubescents.

X

X

The flight to Russia was relatively peaceful. The Soviet Union had broken up several years before and some flights were being offered into the former Communist regions. In this case, though, Hari had decided to bypass that and stole a single-engine plane from what had been East Germany and flew it to the Russian coast of the Arctic

Ocean himself, thus allowing the avoidance of customs and he only had to evade MiGs twice, both times by using prescience to dive in such a way that they crashed long before drawing a bead on him.

As he flew over a tanker, he leaned out of the cockpit and spat a fireball that exploded against the prow, blowing a massive hole into it and sending out a spray of caramelizing cola into the air. On his second flyover, he threw a kunai that skewered a Eurasian man on the deck who was struggling with another man over his shoulder. He'd been having trouble carrying the burden, but the pair of knives in his eyesockets definitely made it more difficult. Hari was impressed that the man continued to stagger forwards several steps before finally collapsing.

Hari landed the plane on an ice floe and climbed aboard the craft. His target lay moaning atop the dead man. He examined the mangled flesh below the knee and quickly amputated the limb, cauterizing the wound to prevent infection and then tossed him over his own shoulder and carried him back to the plane.

Delivery was remarkably easy, since he just had to drop off the unconscious man at the small base just a little ways away. They were a bit surprised to see him until he showed them his card and explained that he had some hunter bird for them.

X

X

"How was class?" he asked Hermione.

"It was fine," she answered shortly.

"Did I teach anything important?" he held out his hand and waited for her to place the time-turner into it.

"Something about extraction of high-value targets."

"Oh good; I'm glad I kept it topical."

X

X

"And so another year of school comes to an end," Dumbledore said between bites of Lucky Charms. He was wearing a dressing gown made of something that looked like exceptionally gaudy drapes from a bordello. "I will lie and say it was a pleasure to have all of you in my castle. Except for those of you whom I hate and unfortunately, many of you will be returning next year. Please consider a transfer before the Fall.

"It is with some joy that I report that for a second year, several of our top students have been accepted into the auror corps. I can only hope that they continue to inspire the same bowel-loosening terror that last year's graduates have managed. On the other hand, it makes it hard for me to not have Professor Potter on staff.

"On a related note, not-Professor werewolf has turned in his resignation on the grounds that he has no wish to test the curse on the Defense position. I hope I am able to find another professor to teach instead of Professor Potter." Lupin hid behind his hands at the intensity of the glares. And the interested looks from those who were about to be former students.

"Furthermore, the train left ten minutes ago. You are all trespassing. Get out before I have the aurors arrest you!" He sat down and went back to his food, the Professors staring at him in confusion. Dumbledore looked up from eating. "Seriously. I'm fining all of you ten galleons for this. Now get off my property!"

It took several moments for it to sink in and then the Great Hall emptied.

X

X

"Pansy?" It took a bit of effort not to jump, but she managed it and finished putting away her school books.

"Yes, Hari?"

"Sprinkles would like to stay with you over the summer."

"And how do you know that your dog wants to stay with me? Did he tell you?"

"Yes," said a voice she didn't recognize.

She whirled around and saw... "Holy shit, Stubby Boardman?"

"Gah!" the man covered his face. "I'm Sirius Black! Ow!" The last bit was because he was smacked by a newspaper.

"You're Sprinkles!" insisted Hari.

"You're Sprinkles?"

"No, I'm Padfoot. Ow!"

"YOU LICKED MY HAND!"

"I was a *dog* ! There are limited ways to comfort someone!"

"You're a dirty, old man!"

"Well, yes, but that's not why I licked your hand."

"Why?"

"I was the white sheep of the family. I recognized the look on your face from my own summers."

"Oh."

"Yeah. So here's the thing. Your parents are going to think I'm a mass murdering right hand dude of the Dark Jackass. Here's a hint, by the way: I'm innocent. But it'll be a little while before they can prove it."

"So?"

"So, do you think they'll be okay with you hanging out with the notorious murderer and Dark Jackhole supporter, Sirius Black for the summer? Because then they'll have to put up with me teaching you how to enchant your motorcycle. It must be okay if I'm doing it, y'know?"

Pansy looked thoughtful.

"My bike can fly."

"Deal."

X

X

==outtaKE==

Dumbledore stared at nothing for a little while. He was at something of a loss about how to go about dealing with this. For one thing, no one would explain to him just what had happened; he prided himself on knowing what happened in his castle, but he was finding that since his newest hiring, he was less and less certain of that. Only two people seemed likely to know for sure and one of them was somehow nowhere to be found. Ginny Weasley, who was now insisting that she be referred to as Tam, was claiming that this was some sort of side effect of the diary last year. He was positive that wasn't what had happened, but it was the best he was going to get. It also meant that there was someone touched by Tom Riddle wandering around the castle.

Ordinarily, he'd have dealt with this by just arranging an accident, but so far, three students had died and none of them had been the girl he wanted dead. He was pretty sure that he was going to have to go to something overt and that would be a bit of a problem since people would be liable to comment if someone at his school died to the killing curse. And in the meantime, he was busy putting off meeting with the Weasleys until he was sure what he was going to tell them.

On the other hand, he'd easily made his payment to the mercenary who was making so much trouble for him.

X

X

"My brothers are being difficult," Tam said to Hari as they sat at the Slytherin table for breakfast.

"Oh?" They were sitting with the rest of the group, most of whom were slowly coming to accept that they were not going to escape spending time with two Gryffindors.

"Something about slimy Slytherins or the like, according to Ron. The others are getting a little better. It's not helping that Dumbledore isn't on my side this time, though."

"They'll manage."

"Probably." Tam shrugged. "If not, I may need a place to stay over the summer."

"You can stay with Harry," Hari replied, drawing a squawk of fear from the boy. "I'll pay you."

"You do realize that I might like to go home and can't because I'm already there?"

"You'll adjust."

"To never going home again?"

"Yep."

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

(A/N John)

So now Spoon is sick and that's kicking our writing schedule to death.

(A/N 2 John)

And the title refers to once again some aside has turned into a major plot element.

(A/N 3 John)

On the upside, we're finally done with Year Three. Which I had thought was going to be a short one. It's now around eighty-thousand words. Go figure.

(A/N 4 John)

Come Year Four, things are going to go further and further off the rails. Thankfully, we have a pretty good idea of what's going to happen. Summer is going to be crazy.

(A/N 5 John)

With luck, Spoon is recovered and writing will resume.

He's WHAT!

Chapter 65: He's WHAT?!

Dumbledore watched the last of the children board the recalled Hogwarts Express with a certain pleasure. Another year over, another batch of youngsters smrter than they were. He wished they were smarter instead. At least Severus had pretty much mellowed out finally. Now he just had to deal with the logistics of the Tournament for next year. He had tried very hard to convince the powers-that-were that this was not a good idea, but he had been overruled on this one and he couldn't come out and say that he feared for the lives of the competitors because Hari Potter was going to slaughter them all without giving himself the headache of explaining that Hari Potter was *probably* a serial murderer. He wasn't quite sure how, but apparently no one had connected Hari Potter with Professor Potter... that was probably for the best in terms of his own peace and quiet.

Actually, he had a few other things to oversee. The first of which was the removal of the dementors from his grounds. With the end of the school year, the people in charge of such matters were finally convinced that Professor Potter was no longer in danger from Sirius Black. The Ministry officials were already rounding up the monsters and getting them the hell away. He was planning to put his foot down on the whole having-them-there thing next year, though. He'd only agreed because he thought there was a credible threat to his students (not Potter, of course, whom he would have gladly watched Black attack when he thought the man was guilty, but still) and since he didn't see one anymore, he wasn't going to risk them being near those same children. Also, international incidents were a bad thing. And since if it happened on his grounds, he might have to sort it out, he was all for it being someone else's problem.

"Headmaster?" said the executive officer of Azkaban, dragging Dumbledore from his thoughts with a worried tone.

"Hm?" It took him several moments to remember that the man's name was something like Smithers, but he really didn't care and would rather get back to his wool-gathering.

"We have a problem."

"Of course we do, lad," it was so much easier to just call his former students things like that than remember them if they hadn't been remarkable enough to have something to recollect. "Otherwise you wouldn't be bothering me. What is it?"

"We're missing a dozen and one dementors."

"You're what? It's not like they just wander off except to attack things and Hogsmeade hasn't suffered their predations." This was exactly the kind of thing he didn't need. Bad enough that he was nearly certain Professor Potter had been using the sadness-monsters for his classes... aaaand that was probably why they were missing.

"Just get the ones not missing off my property before I get annoyed." Best case scenario was that Potter had found a way to kill the immortal beasts-thankfully they were humanoid(ish) and so Hagrid wouldn't be upset-but he wasn't expecting to be that lucky.

"Yes, Headmaster."

X

X

"Hi dad!" Hari watched in surprise as the fireball split on the tanto in front of him and splashed against the wall in a bloom of scorching. "So that works." He poked his head out from the area of invisibility. "Like my new blade?"

Itachi stared for several moments, trying to absorb the fact that he was seeing his son's head floating in the air. Again. "Blade?" he asked, once he was certain this was, in fact, happening.

Hari turned the weapon so the flat was facing his father. "See? It cuts light."

"Alright then. How was your year?"

"I made lots of money as a mercenary. My new branch is going great." He considered for a moment. "I may need some new employees if I get more business. There's lots of work, always a job."

Itachi kept the surprise from his face. It told him a great deal about the size of the world where his son went to school. In the elemental nations, ninja could reliably count on a good bit of down time between jobs, more as the scale of the work went up. While this was partly a function of how many ninja there were, it was also because there was only so much work to go around. Plenty of merchants needed to be escorted, but there were only a few people who could afford to hire someone to wipe out even a peasant village. There must, therefore, be a good deal more money available in this other world and enough people that there could be jobs of that magnitude regularly requested.

"Anyway, I have gifts for people!"

X

X

"Ah! Itachi!" Naruto realized that the person who had ordered a pork noodles-with-broth-in (he was trying to get people to adopt the foreign word that had been mentioned by Teuchi, but it had yet to catch on) next to him was his estranged cousin. He tried to jump back, Spiraling Sphere forming in his hand when a huge hand from the person on the other side of him shoved him back into his seat.

"Kid, if he were going to attack you, he wouldn't have ordered lunch." Jiraiya gave the pretty waitress a wink and then turned. "I'll skip the usual babble since I'm hungry; what do you want?"

Itachi held up the package he'd had lying against the bar. It was a boy with black hair (and a shock of red), whose body was plastered in paralytic seals. "Fix him."

"If you insist," Jiraiya said slowly. "I hear that you were planning to breed him into..."

"Where does that *come from*?" demanded the Uchiha. When Naruto began to whistle innocently, he glared. "Never mind. I need you to make him better."

Jiraiya looked over the package (now resting against the bar again). "What's wrong with him, then?"

"Puberty."

"I have to tell you, lad, that's normal."

"I am aware." Itachi's hand shot out and stopped Naruto from touching the seals. "Please don't do that; he keeps trying to gouge out his own eyes when we take those off." He focused on Jiraiya. "It's happening all at once, Jiraiya-sama. It had rendered him catatonic before he began his attempts at mutilation."

"I'll bite. How?"

"Well..."

X

X

Itachi sighed and followed his son out of the room, listening to the cries of 'presents!' echoing off the walls as the boy alerted everyone to his return. Sometimes he despaired of his child ever growing up.

By the time he got to the meeting room, everyone else was assembled. In spite of what might be believed, much of their time

was occupied with nothing at all since there was only so much work for a group of missing ninja as fucked up as they were.

"I have presents for everyone!" Hari began to hand out boxes. The first was given to his father, who opened it and found a small, flat thing with 'Dad' written on it and a weird, rubbery, black backing.

"What is this?"

"Here, I'll show you!" Hari took the thing and placed it against the scratched headband Itachi still wore. It stuck to the metal plate, covering it.

X

X

"Well, that explains that," said Jiraiya, pointing at the thing still affixed to Itachi's headband.

"Indeed."

X

X

Then his son handed Uncle Tobi a package, unaware of the seething glare directed at him. He also missed the twitch as Tobi's hand went for a kunai for the merest fraction of a second. The clearing of Itachi's throat stopped that movement and instead he took the gift from Hari and slowly opened it, expecting to be horrified or infuriated.

"Hi!" said a chipper voice from inside the box. "I'm Jenius Japes, Jokes, and Jonks! by M. Spoon the Number One resource for magical humor! I have over ten thousand classic jokes in me and thousands of new ones as well! I come with more than one hundred great prank ideas and even include supplies! You'll be the life of the party with me by your side! You don't even need to tell the jokes in me, I'll do it for you. Rejoice in your ownership of the first, last, and

only humor device you'll ever need! Remember to buy the next edition!"

Tobi started at it.

"Just name a subject and I'll pull a random joke from my collection!"

Tobi glared. "Death."

"Why was the farmer afraid of the crows?" The book paused almost two seconds. "Because they were in a murder!" Canned laughter played from the depths of the box. "Thank you, thank you!" There was another pause. "Wasn't that funny? How about another? Please?" Tobi put the top back on the box. There was a muffled sound of pleading.

X

X

"Don't ask," Itachi said when Jiraiya opened his mouth.

X

X

"Brat, you had better not have gotten me another animal," snarled Kisame as he opened the present in his hands. There was a gentle 'fwee!' from inside the box. "What the fuck is this thing?"

"A puffskein!"

"A what?"

"It's a ball of fluff that- a long tongue extended from the box and shoved itself up Kisame's nose. "-eats snot."

Kisame blinked.

X

X

"Seriously, you don't want to ask," Itachi said.

"Alright, but when did..."

"I'm getting to that."

X

X

"Here you go, Aunt Konan." Hari held out her present. She accepted it warily and slowly removed the wrapping paper, obviously apprehensive, especially with Pein observing over her shoulder in curiosity. She was about to open it when Hari froze and turned bright red. "NO!" He shouted and spat a fireball that came as such a shock it managed to set the gift on fire before Konan could dodge. Hari turned and fled the room, screaming.

"What..." Konan stared at the ashes on her palms. "What just happened there?"

Itachi blinked slowly. "I'll go ask my son, shall I?"

Her eyes narrowed a little. "You do that."

Itachi returned a few minutes later with a mildly nonplussed expression on his face. "He appears to be going through puberty."

"I see?" Pein said.

"Unless I miss my guess, all at once."

"Uh... can that happen?"

"Apparently."

X

X

"You're serious?" Jiraiya asked.

Itachi turned his catatonic son slightly to reveal his collar. "I managed to get a few words out of him." *Many of them were his horror at seeing me and Konan naked, not that I'm ever saying that to anyone.* "And he said that it's part of the Curse Mark Orochimaru tried to get to work."

"Orochimaru marked your son?"

"No..."

"Huh. Then how..."

"He put it on himself. He might have stolen a prototype for a new version of the seal from Orochimaru while he was infiltrating Sound."

"Your son is insane?"

"No, but I understand your assumption there. My guess is that Orochimaru wanted to have puberty happen all at once to reduce the amount of time that his soldiers are out of commission due to awkwardness with attraction and so on."

Jiraiya nodded. "It seems plausible. He *would* rather traumatize someone instead of just letting things progress naturally."

"Anyway, my son needs to be fixed now. I've been having trouble getting food into him and this is getting ridiculous. He needs an intensive course please."

Jiraiya raised his eyebrow. "You're sure?"

"Yeah."

Jiraiya scratched his chin for a moment. "On one condition: you look after Naruto for a week." He was one of the few people with clearance to know about the truth of Itachi and the massacre.

"Agreeable. I shall train him."

Jiraiya took the still frozen Hari and tucked him under an arm, vanishing in a cloud of leaves.

Itachi squinted at Naruto, who was staring in shocked confusion. "Y-you're going to train me?" His voice squeaked as he asked.

"Yes." He cocked his head to one side. "Are those my Sharingan?" It could have been expected that he would worry about the safety of his brother, what with someone else having those eyes, but Sasori had current reports on Sasuke's activities that were accurate up until a day or so prior, so the odds that someone had killed his brother and taken those eyes was low.

"Yep!" Naruto replied cheerfully. "Sasuke said that since I'm an Uchiha, I should have a Sharingan!"

"Of course. That makes perfect sense." Itachi nodded and then froze. "What are you talking about?"

"My name is Uchiha Naruto!" The blond bounced in place. "Acting head of the Uchiha clan. Sasuke adopted me to 'reduce the level of violent, incestuous crazy' in the clan."

"What do you mean 'acting head'?"

Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "Well, Sasuke is off training with Orochimaru so he can kill you-Sasuke, I mean, not Orochimaru-but that means he's sort of technically a missing-nin, only no one is able to declare it because that's generally the purview of the Military Police, and I happen to be the head of that body as the only remaining loyal Uchiha. So right now it's kind of a default thing that I'm in charge."

"Dear lord," Itachi murmured. "Konoha has gone insane while I've been away. This is the only plausible explanation."

"Uh..."

"Well, I said I'd train you. Time for an assessment. Get into the first stance."

"The what?"

"The first stance."

"What's that?"

"Oh."

X

X

==outtaKE==

"You know that not-Professor Headmaster keeps trying to kill you?" Hari asked Tam.

"Professor Headm-Professor Dumbledore wouldn't do that!" snapped Hermione. She had, despite her best intentions, been listening in when Tam and Hari talked at mealtimes because they were always discussing things so far advanced of her classes that it was rather like offering heroin to an opium addict.

"Of course he would," Hari replied. "He wants her dead, after all."

"Isn't she possessed?" asked Harry.

"Not really. This is Ginerva Tam Marvolo Riddle Weasley."

Harry's eyes went huge and his hand had already begun to reach for his wand when Tam's finger pressed against his forehead. "Ah-ah,"

she cautioned quietly. "It's rude to draw wands on people who haven't done anything to you."

"You killed my parents!" hissed Harry, who was pretty sure that while the school seemed to have mellowed since last year's Parsel tongue incident, if he started insisting that 'Tam' Weasley was possessed by the spirit of Voldemort (someone everyone else was sure was dead) they'd call him crazy-hell, he was beginning to think he was a bit nuts too.

"And I apologized! Several times!" Tam said. "Besides, it wasn't *me* who did it. Just because I have part of a maniac's soul helping to boost my magic does *not* mean I'm that maniac. Hell, I'm based on the personality of that maniac at age sixteen. Only not as fucked up."

"Language! Oh shit!" Hermione covered her mouth when she realized that she was telling off the Dark Lord.

"Relax, Hermione." Tam shook her head. "Professor Headmaster-now you have me doing it too, Hari-has good reason to want me dead. I *am* the spirit of Tom Riddle. Sort of. Only I mellowed out. Hari provided some therapy. I guess that's what to call it."

"You're really sorry?" Harry asked.

"Yep."

"Not just about the whole dying thing?" he probed.

"Meh. Knowing me, I wasn't going to die just because of some magical incident. I mean, you even said that the other me is still around making trouble, right?"

"Uh..."

"So I'm hardly going to be upset about it. Besides, even if I were bitter, do you have *any* idea what would happen to me if I tried to hurt you while Hari is your guardian?"

"Not really..."

"Neither do I. I like it that way." Tam sighed. "And when all's said and done, I have to admit that being evil was a lot of effort. Being grouchy is much, much less stressful. I've been doing some reading and it seems like that's better for my health anyway."

(A/N John)

Guess what? We're back and it's the sort-of Start of Year Four! Things are officially going to be a bit nuts for a few chapters.

(A/N 2 John)

In the next couple of chapters (assuming things don't get sidetracked) will be what happens with Jiraiya and Hari and Itachi and Naruto, a look at the past year of Sasuke and Naruto's efforts to further derail canon, and Hari making trouble where there wasn't before (situation normal there).

(A/N 3 John)

Also, you may have noticed that Hari is going through puberty. Jiraiya will be addressing this in short order. Mostly. Some of the more... subtle aspects are likely to be overlooked, but you can bet that the basic training normally given to prevent embarrassment from getting in the way will be provided in spades.

(A/N 4 John)

It's worth remembering that Hari is a bit of a stamina freak. And now he has Sage mode.

(A/N 5 John)

On the subject of Sage mode, I understand that some people are confused. The Curse Mark is canonically a way of merging Orochimaru's Sage-ness, which isn't all that hot, with Juugao's innate ability to absorb Nature chakra. In other words, if one got it working properly, persistent Sage mode. Hari bends reality around him enough to blend magical theory with sealing to make something like that. And yes, his works will become more and more elaborate as he goes on. He doesn't exactly have ambition in the normal sense, but he always likes coming up with new things that he doesn't realize are revolutionary because they seem so simple to him.

How It Went

Chapter 66: How It Went

(Warning: Slight smut/mentions of sex stuff in this chapter)

"Hi dad!"

Itachi didn't even blink as he flicked a fireball at Naruto to 'encourage' more action on the part of the blond. Naruto, on the other hand, was busy trying to recover from the shock and suddenly had to dodge the fireball coming at his face. He mostly managed it.

"How's he coming along?" asked Jiraiya as he observed Naruto diving for a lake that hadn't been there when he'd left.

"Hn." Itachi glowered a little.

"Dad says my cousin's not doing too badly, but that he needed to learn the pussy stuff."

Jiraiya blinked. "The what?"

"Basic stances," grumbled Itachi.

"Oooooh. That explains a lot, doesn't it?" Jiraiya rubbed his chin. Not much he could do to undo years of neglect, but he could persevere with teaching the brat anyway. He'd turned the boy's old man into the Hokage, so compared to that...

"My son seems to be working again."

"Yep." Jiraiya grinned hugely. "Definitely one of my success stories here. I'm proud to have such a skilled student."

"I am unsure if that's a good thing."

"It will be." Jiraiya's expression was one of great perversion.

Itachi rubbed his face and then examined his son. There was certainly no catatonic state anymore and no blushing either. On the other hand, there was something different in how he stood. Slightly more calm maybe? More like an adult? Then he remembered that he son was more than able to fake maturity for days at a time, especially when up to something and relaxed a little.

"In that case, Lord Jiraiya, I will be taking Hari."

"Not a problem, kiddo." Jiraiya clapped Hari on the shoulder. Well, clapped the air above his shoulder so as to not cause him to dodge. "Go forth and do me proud."

"I think I'll do girls, Pervert Sage."

Itachi sighed.

"So how were things with my cousin?" asked Hari as they headed back towards Rain.

"They were..."

X

X

"You need the Talk." Naruto stated as soon as Jiraiya was out of sight.

"I what."

"The Talk. Someone needs to explain to you the facts of life."

Itachi blinked.

"Especially how it's not okay that your parents forced you to have sex with your sister."

"Wait what?"

"I know they were your parents and all, but obviously they weren't very good ones if they'd abuse you and your sister that way. I mean even the orphanage attendants weren't that bad. All they did was make me sit in a corner a lot and stuff. So your parents must have been really shitty."

Itachi blinked again. Apparently the world had gone insane.

"So I know that you're in denial, but the first step in getting better is to admit the problem. That's why we're going to break through those barriers so you can face your memories."

"What are you talking about? I don't even have a sister."

"The damage is pretty extensive, I see. Well, maybe we can start on something simple. Even if your parents did it to you, it's still not okay to make your son have sex with your sister. Telling him that she's his aunt doesn't make it okay."

Itachi rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I have to know: how did you come to the conclusion that I plan to have Hari sleep with Konan?"

"For one thing, he thinks she's pretty."

"Do you want to sleep with everyone you think is prett-" Itachi stopped. *"You're what, fourteen or so? Of course you do. I withdraw the question."*

"And for another, he knows what she looks like naked."

"He knows what everyone looks like naked!"

Naruto's look of disgust was enough that Itachi decided to begin some intensive training via the application of a Grand Fireball.

X

X

"It went."

"Training with the Pervert was interesting."

X

X

Hari was completely immobile for the first day as Jiraiya both plied women of easy virtue and paid them to ply Hari. During the second day, Jiraiya began the lessons. It was remarkable to hear the variety of sounds a human could make without using a kunai.

X

X

"So you have the Byakugan, kid."

"No."

"Wasn't a question."

"I don't have it."

"I'm going to pretend you're not lying to me and move on to where I was going with this. You have an unprecedented ability to understand my teachings. I want you watch carefully what I do." Most people would have found it disconcerting that this discussion was going on while the man was fingering a prostitute, but Hari had spent two days in the company of Jiraiya while in a brothel. "I expect you to ace the test I have waiting for you at the end of the week." He pointed at the prostitute sitting on the futon in front of Hari. "Do as I do."

X

X

"Do you ever get tired, kid?"

"Nope."

"Did you get tired before the Sage chakra?"

"Some."

"Do you mind?" demanded the prostitute Hari was working on. "He was doing nicely until you spoke up."

"He's got to learn how to work with distractions, Yuki-hime." Jiraiya gave her a smile and picked up the woman beside him.

X

X

"Do you know even I have never been asked to leave three brothels in a week because of tiring out everyone there?"

"Is that good, Pervert Sage?"

"I really wish I'd never told you that nickname."

"But it's so fitting."

"All the same..."

"Is it good?"

"The name? No. Being asked to leave? Sort of."

X

X

"So what's this test you have for me, Pervert Sage?"

"Oh that? I've got a seduction specialist who tried to seduce me tied up. I was planning on dealing with her myself, but it'll be a good test."

"Alright."

"I look forwards to seeing my training put to use."

X

X

"Kid..." the Toad Sage had sat down by the side of the road on a stone that was suspiciously bench-like. It was right outside the hideout he'd been using to keep his most recent captive hidden. He was currently taking great pulls out of a jug of sake and intermixing that with scrubbing his hand down his face and rubbing his eyes, trying to get the world to come into focus. So far, the alcohol was mostly giving him a mild buzz and he was trying to work out where he'd gone wrong in his life aside from being a boozing, womanizing old lech.

"Yes, Pervert?"

"Kid, you're not supposed to actually end up with her unconscious four times."

"But how else was I supposed to finish the Exercise?"

Jiraiya sighed. "If you don't need the full set of steps, there's no reason to use them."

"Oh."

"As it is, I have to hope you didn't render her completely insensate for good. As lovely a voice as she has, hearing it like this is not the point of the activity. She's supposed to be turned into an agent."

"Oh."

"Not that it wasn't impressive, mind you." Jiraiya took another long sip and tossed the clay jug to the side of the road, where it smashed. "I don't know if anyone's ever managed to complete the Exercise when done properly, but I think we've demonstrated why."

"My lord!" came a voice from inside the hideout.

"And as much as we were trying to encourage her to speak, this is getting silly."

X

X

"How do you mean 'interesting'?" asked Itachi as he and his son flitted through trees towards Rain.

"Enlightening? He mentioned you might not want specifics. If you want me to give them..."

"No!" Itachi's response was loud and vehement. "I think I can imagine the general idea."

"I doubt it, dad. You don't read Aunt Konan's books."

Itachi nearly hit a tree when he heard that.

X

X

"So, brat, how was training with Itachi?" Jiraiya asked his pupil, one he hoped would someday rival the one he'd just taught. It would amuse him greatly if his student's son was more open about things than Minato had been. The only reason he didn't spy on them was because he'd known both when they were preteens and having been personally involved with them made it a bit icky. On the other hand,

he knew what those bruises were when Minato showed up for training and had given his favorite student a few pointers that he had been thanked for repeatedly.

"He was a lot less angry than I expected. I think the trauma is deeper than I had believed."

Jiraiya wasn't sure how to broach the subject that Itachi had been under orders at the time with the current *acting head of the Uchiha* without admitting that the village had, well, ordered the death of the entire clan. While Naruto had voiced, in his official capacity no less, unfavorable opinions about the late members of the Uchiha, there was a big difference between thinking they weren't very nice (Naruto's words) and being okay with the village actually commanding a thirteen-year-old member of the clan to butcher every last man, woman, and child. That was the kind of thing that could get someone upset. On the other hand, he was having a hard time with the fact that Naruto was expecting Itachi to be angry (although, Jiraiya had to admit that being angry with those orders wouldn't have been irrational, but Itachi was a devout pacifist and so had taken the job of killing them all—and wasn't *that* a mind-screw?). "Well, that's good?"

"I think I started to make headway in getting him to accept what his family did to him."

And that was another thing. Naruto had been insisting that Itachi had been forced to breed with a sister that Jiraiya was certain had not been alive. Either that or the Uchiha were better at stealth than both he and Danzō, because both of them should have known about a loose end like that.

"At the least, I'm pretty sure I convinced him not to make his son have sex with his aunt."

"Well, that's something," Jiraiya offered. Of all the things that kid was likely to do, fucking his favorite (and only) aunt wasn't likely on the list. The boy seemed pretty stable in that regard. He wondered again

about the name Konan appearing in Rain, but shook it off. She and Nagato and Yahiko were dead and dwelling on the loss of every single one of his students (barring the one currently babbling about once again getting noodles-with-broth-in made a mandatory food at all official functions in Leaf) was a good way to wreck his good mood.

X

X

"Hi, Aunt Konan!" Hari cheerfully dodged the explosive tags that flew at him as a reaction to his greeting.

"Feeling better, Hari?" Konan wasn't sure how to face her nephew now that he was paying attention to women. Or, rather, now that he was paying attention to women and knew what she looked like naked, what she liked to read, and how she tended to read it.

"Yep! Hi, Uncle Pein!"

"Did your father escort you the entire time, Hari?"

"Nope! I was being trained by Pervert Sage!"

"WHO?"

"Jiraiya."

"Oh." Pein paused. "WHAT?"

"He helped me learn how to deal with seeing Aunt Konan naked all the time." Konan turned red. "I even can deal with seeing you naked also." Pein scowled at the distaste Hari used in the wording. Not that he wanted to have his nephew attracted to him, but there was something... insulting in how disgusted the boy sounded compared to his aunt (to whom he was apparently neutral).

"Did you get me any new books from him?" Konan asked, still flushed. As much as she was mortified to ask her nephew, it was still Lord Jiraiya's books.

"I don't think he published anything while we were training. He spent a chunk of the time drinking heavily, though."

"Oh."

"And he helped me pick out a good gift for a woman!" Hari held out a somewhat flat box that Konan took with a degree of trepidation.

"What did he..." she trailed off as she undid the wrapping and examined the amount of frills hidden inside. And the lack of anything else. "I see."

"He was impressed that I could give your measurements!" Hari chirped.

Konan's blush deepened as she examined the numbers on the tag.
"But this isn't-"

"You wear two sizes too small. He taught me about fitting, too! He said it's very important to wear the right size to avoid back problems from large..."

"Hari? Did you mentioned that this gift was for your aunt?" asked Pein, his face covered by his hands and the beginnings of a headache afflicting his primary body as he felt the heat coming off his best friend and second in command.

"No, Uncle Pein. Should I have?"

"I think it's safe to say yes," Pein managed as Konan stomped from the room, humiliation etched into the set of her mouth. From outside was the sound of Hidan not even getting to open his mouth before being skewered and exploded out of the Tower. "I wish she would at least let him actually say something rude first; there's always a

chance he won't." He looked at Hari's expression. "A *small* chance," he admitted.

X

X

The worst part, Konan felt, was that it *did* fit better.

X

X

==outtake==

"Merry Christmas," said Hari to the Slytherins who had stayed for the holiday. "That's what I'm supposed to say, right?" He had a stack of presents floating behind him as he entered the Common Room.

"Yes," said Harry shortly.

"Aren't you supposed to say it back?"

"Under normal circumstances," said Tam. She had opted to stay behind this year so that she could have more time to think about how to explain this to her family. In the meantime, Hogwarts was a better place to be, even with Dumbledore trying to kill her. He'd pretty much stopped anyway, since he was getting tired of injuring or killing other students. Given what she could recall of this world's previous year, she wasn't sure why Dumbledore seemed to care about that. "But you see, Harry is a bit upset-"

"Bloody enraged."

"-is bloody enraged because you got Remus Lupin fired for being a Werewolf."

"About that," Hari said. "Could you explain again why he was fired? I mean, what's the big deal?"

"Werewolves are feared and hated throughout the world because some of them are vicious murderers and the rest are uncontrollable while in their wolf form," Tam explained.

"But it's just like having a period. He gets achey and then angry and then achey," Hari tried.

"I don't think anyone was impressed by that theory," Daphne muttered from her patch of Common Room where she and her sister were trapped trying to levitate stones. Hari had refused to let them go until they could at least do that and had threatened to kidnap them from their beds if they went home for the holidays without permission. They were convinced he was insane enough to do it. (They were right).

"Even so," Hari went on, "everyone admitted he was taking a potion that meant he was in control as a wolf. So he was about as dangerous then as, well, he normally is. And aren't there plenty of wizards who go around killing people all month long, not just one night in twenty-eight?"

"Anyways, I have gifts!" Packages floated over to Blaise, Daphne, Astoria, and Harry. "I didn't get you anything, Tam. I figured being yourself was a good gift."

"Thanks, Hari."

"Any time."

Blaise, Daphne, and Astoria opened their gifts to find scraps of paper (and Hari was still insisting on using pulped wood instead of animal skin for some reason).

"Right. I'm going to go deliver gifts to everyone else!" Hari exclaimed before vanishing in a cloud of fire.

"Was that a phoenix?" muttered Daphne.

"Yes," said both Tam and Harry.

Harry opened his gift. "What in the bloody fuck?" he demanded as he drew out the Sword of Gryffindor.

(A/N John)

So we're back again. With luck this will continue. Just in time for the Holiday season, we're entering another period of holidays in one of the worlds. Gosh aren't there a lot of them.

(A/N 2 John)

And I promise as usual that shit is going to go more bat soon.

(A/N 3 John)

We are going through a time of interesting events in Hari's life as he explores the world and leaves his usual chaos in his wake. That is certain.

(A/N 4 John)

I'm sorry to say that Hari isn't likely to have sex with Fleur. Have no fear, he will be tapping that a lot, though. As you can see, he's not a sex-crazed maniac. As amusing as that might have been, it's really only funny once and then gets boring, so I didn't go with it.

(A/N 5 John)

But he'll be fucking things now and again. When it serves a purpose (often that will be when it creates a scene that amuses me and Spoon)

Rearming

Chapter 67: Rearming

"Itachi."

The man in question looked up at his leader from the current intelligence report on his brother. Sasori didn't reveal his sources, and Itachi wasn't sure he wanted to know whom was suborned in Sound anyway, but apparently Orochimaru had decided to move Sasuke to an outlying base to prevent further incursions. It was a good thing Hari was supposed to be escorted places, because... it occurred to him that he hadn't seen his son for a few days and that his leader was looking worried. "Yes, Leader-Sama?"

"I wanted to ask you if you've seen Hari recently?" Pein's voice was deceptively mild.

"You know something," said Itachi, "I was just thinking that I haven't. But you ordered him to not leave without an escort, so I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

"The last time he was out and about sans supervision, he stole Waterfall's Hero Water. I'm not sure that I can overstate how much trouble I don't need."

"With all due respect, Leader-Sama, my little brother is currently back in Sound, so the most likely problem to deal with will be Orochimaru angry at us again and I doubt he wants us paying him another visit and burning down what little my son left undisturbed a second time in as many years."

"Joy. We'll just have one of the most dangerous, not to mention devious, men not on my payroll angry at us. I have no doubt that snake could make our lives difficult in a myriad of ways we'd never

trace back to him if we really manage to tick him off. I do not need that kind of headache, Itachi."

"But he would need an escort..."

"Tobi wants to know if anyone has seen Hidan," Tobi said, poking his head into the room. From outside could be heard the sound of a somewhat disheartened joke book saying 'Why won't you laugh, Mister Tobi? I told the joke about six orphans, a bus, and a three-hundred foot cliff...' "Tobi thinks Hidan would be a good companion for Tobi's 'gift'."

"Hi dad!"

"See?" Itachi said, mildly. "He's right here. Nothing to worry about."

"WHERE IS THAT FUCKING BRAT?" Hidan's voice echoed through the Tower.

"Never mind, Tobi found him."

X

X

Uchiha Sasuke wasn't sure where Orochimaru got his information, but he'd heard a rumor that Sasuke's nephew was back in the Elemental Nations and had decided to take preemptive measures to avoid another incident like the previous year's. Sasuke's venture in hunting an A-rank bounty had been suddenly curtailed by that news and he was instead bundled off to a secret base hidden deep in the mountains of Sea Country, far away from Rice.

At the moment, he was reading a letter from the best decision he'd made in his short life. Naruto was proving to be highly amusing when given power. He had a stack of scrolls an inch thick that Kabuto had managed to get for him, detailing the effects of Naruto on Leaf. So

far, it had been impressive and scary. The letter he was reading right now, though, involved his brother.

Sasuke was unclear why his brother had decided to train Naruto for a week or so. There was something fishy about his nephew needing help with puberty—that story stank to high heaven. Then again, maybe Itachi needed to get him used to it before he tried to breed him? That would be like the poor man. Naruto reported that he had been unwilling to admit the possibility of trauma, but that wasn't so surprising. He hoped that his adopted clansman was right about Itachi temporarily giving a reprieve from his nephew having sex with their sister. He'd take what he could get.

On the upside, Itachi hadn't ripped out Naruto's eyes. That would have been bad. And now he was understating things like Naruto. Oh well; there were worse traits to pick up from the blond menace to sanity. He hadn't wanted his brother's eyes in his head, so it had been fortuitous that he'd adopted someone who was in need of a set of Sharingan.

He ducked under a barrage of kunai and a lightning technique he didn't know the name of. Kabuto didn't mind him reading his post, but refused to allow valuable training time to go to waste. The fact that the white-haired freak wasn't present didn't matter, Sasuke had sort of become used to that method of training; besides, he had the distinct impression that the boy would know if he didn't study thoroughly.

Sasuke's Sharingan informed him he was about to be rendered unconscious. He went to dodge and his eyes went through almost a dozen iterations of possible futures as he responded to each, always ending up with blackness clouding his vision. The one he ended up taking took the longest and involved dodging three times before managing to half-spin around and seeing a single red eye spinning in the dark...

"Fuck."

X

X

Hari whistled cheerfully as he looted the hideout. There had been plenty of cool things this time, not just that boring seal like the main base in Sound. And Uncle Sasuke had managed to dodge three times!

There was a man chained up in a cell plastered with 'Danger' signs who seemed rather unhappy and Hari considered letting him out, but the man was quite rude when he walked by, so he decided to let him find his own way out. It was interesting how he made his arms into rockets and tried to punch Hari's face. He was less impressive when clutching at the space his nose had occupied before Hari severed it.

Hari trotted from the base with a set of scrolls sealed into his wrists for later examination. In the meantime, he had to return Uncle Sasuke to Leaf where he was supposed to be.

X

X

Tsunade didn't look up when she sensed someone at her window. That wasn't too unusual-ANBU never seemed to grasp the idea that they didn't need to be so mysterious. Especially since they were walking up the outside of a building painted bright white. The plaster was kept in good condition and blinding to ensure that normally-dressed ninja would stand out like sore thumbs. And anyone wearing a white sufficient to disburse their image against the tower would be obvious elsewhere. Of course, there were ways around it, but it would be remiss to not even try to use simple methods of preventing infiltration.

"Hi, old lady."

Her pencil snapped in her hand. The shards she flung at the boy sitting on her windowsill were casually dodged with more ease than anyone should have when facing a member of Konoha's Sages. Then her eyes took in the sight and she found she couldn't help it. "Why are you gold?"

"Trade secret." The boy had a bundle over his shoulder that had a distinctive duck-butt.

"Is that Uchiha Sasuke?"

"Yep. Uncle Sasuke was being silly. Tell him he's supposed to stay, please?" The boy cocked his head. "Oh wow. That's a really neat seal." He was suddenly in Tsunade's face and shifting his body to avoid her strikes as he stared and began to mutter. It was making it difficult for Tsunade, since she had to avoid hitting Sasuke while trying to ward off his nephew. "Is that why my Sharingan says you look like a really hot woman? Oh, nope. That's just a powerful illusion. You know you'd be more comfortable if you wore the right size. Double-J?" Tsunade screeched as she felt a pair of hands weigh her breasts with more skill than she would / ever/ admit. "No, double-K. I know someone who could hook you up."

The ANBU who were guarding the Hokage tried to intervene. The first got an Uchiha Sasuke to the chest and the second was contemptuously dodged and flung out the open window by a kick that cracked ribs. The third was used to block a punch from the Hokage and was dropped to the ground with massive internal trauma while the fourth had grabbed Tsunade and was dragging her physically from the room as she screamed bloody murder.

"Keep a better watch on him this time, old lady!" called the boy as he jumped into the ANBU who was re-entering the room and found himself once again kicked.

X

X

"Fuck Sound and the assholes of everyone there," growled Hidan as he stalked into the meeting room, an enchanted needle still sewing him back together. His arm dangled loosely at his side. "If I never have to see one of Orochimaru's fucking experiments again, it will be too godsdamn soon."

"Hi, Uncle Hidan," Hari chirped. "What took you so long? I made it to Leaf and back before you got here."

"You were in Leaf." Pein's voice had a slightly dead quality to it.

"Yep."

"Without an escort."

"Uncle Hidan seemed busy with people in Sound and I didn't want to bother him while he was having fun."

"FUCK YOU!" Hidan was towed out of the room, hissing and spitting, by Kakuzu.

"He was enjoying himself," Hari asserted. "Then the reinforcements showed up. I didn't like to interfere."

"You were in Leaf. Without an escort."

"Well, my escort was busy..."

"Losing pursuit or something no doubt. Regardless, and I realize I seem a little fixated, I want to emphasize that you were in / Leaf without an escort /."

"Uncle Pein, are you feeling okay? I already said 'yes'."

Pein's eye twitched. "What chaos did you sow while you were there?"

"I just returned Uncle Sasuke."

"What else?"

"The old lady who was using the Hokage's office was a little jumpy. She started screaming when I checked to make sure I'd estimated her cup size correctly. Uncle Pein, are you alright?" This last part was because the Deva Path had gone deathly pale and was staring into the distance.

"How did you check?"

"Well, my Byakugan was getting a bit of trouble because of her illusion, so I had to manually test."

"Manually test," Pein repeated, sounding far away.

"Using my hands."

"Dear gods, we're going to die."

"I never even got to tell her that there were some flaws in her seal array. I think she left in a part that makes her age."

"Out."

"Okay, Uncle Pein."

"OUT!"

"Alright." Hari trotted from the room.

"ITACHI," snarled Pein. "How did this happen?"

"Well, Leader-Sama..."

"I swear, if you tell me anything that begins with Hari and Hidan going to Sound..."

"Then I'm not sure what you want to know, Leader-Sama."

"You know something? Get out. Just go away."

X

X

"Hari?" Itachi poked his head into his son's room. He was worried that his son was upset at Pein's tone because he hadn't seen him for over a day. He preferred to think that it was that his son was upset and not that he had decided to take another field trip; Itachi wasn't sure how many more trips Pein's heart could handle.

"Hi, dad!" Hari waved his arm at Itachi.

"How are you..." Itachi trailed off when he realized that the arm being waved at him was not, in fact, still connected to Hari. His eyes spun into their Kaleidoscopic form and whirled madly and he was just beginning to have a panic attack when he counted and discovered his son still had the usual two arms coming out of shoulders. The room was strewn with scrolls and notes. "Why are you holding your arm?"

"I had to take it off to attach the new one."

Itachi's mouth worked silently for almost a minute as he tried to find the words for this situation. Finally he came up with "New one?"

"Yeah. I found some stuff in Orochimaru's base and... dad?" Itachi had the same far away look that Pein had had the day before. "I thought it would be a good project since I fixed the curse mark."

"Sasuke needs to stay in Leaf."

"I'm trying, dad. Anyways, it reminded me of the one I took off that Danzō loser and so I had to do a little work to implant bits of that arm into this one. See?" Hari turned and rolled up his sleeve to show eight Sharingan eyes wide open along the length of the limb. "But it keeps doing this," he held up his hand, from which a bonsai tree was

growing before he pulled it out. "I think if I work on my chakra control a bit more, I should be able to make it work properly. Orochimaru had a whole scroll full of great technique ideas. It kind of reminds me of the First Hokage."

"Hari."

"Yeah, dad?"

"As your father, you know I take an interest in your personal development, right?"

"Yeah, dad."

"I'm going to ask-no, make that /order/ you to discuss any further... improvements, alterations, modifications, and so on with me. *Before* you do them."

"Okay, dad."

Itachi sighed. With any other Uchiha, he knew that those orders would be circumvented, avoided, misinterpreted, or otherwise manipulated to disobey; with his son, sadly, he just knew that the boy would manage all of that and not realize he had done so. He brightened slightly there; even though his son was exhibiting the arguably negative traits of the Uchiha, at least it wasn't purposely and that counted for something, right? "Hari, I..."

"Someone send me Hari!" boomed Pein's voice through the Tower.

"... guess you had best go see what Leader-Sama wants."

"Okay, dad." Hari hopped up and left the room, still absently holding his own severed arm.

"Hari-WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED TO YOUR ARM?"

X

X

==outtake==

"Hey, Millie!" Hari said, ducking as he appeared in her living room. He looked around in confusion and spotted his friend's mother looking at him in a mix of terror and confusion.

"Hello... Uchiha." Millie was not quite at the point where she was willing to admit that Hari had effectively taken over Slytherin (including the older years) and somehow decided she was a friend.

"I've got your Christmas present for you." Hari held out a small package. "I know it's a little late, but I figured I should get it to you anyway."

"It's Christmas morning," Mille replied.

"Still." Hari looked around and frowned. "Why hasn't your mother tried to kill me yet?"

"What? Why would she do that?" She frowned. "See what you did? Now she's fainted in horror. Was that really necessary?"

"Shouldn't she have been punching me or something? It's what she usually does."

"In what world does *that* happen?"

"Mine."

There wasn't much Millie could say to that one.

"Hello, Millie's father," Hari greeted. Instinctively, he dodged the ham-sized fist aimed at him. "Do you like being flung through walls?" he asked in a friendly tone. A second attempt to crush his skull was the only reply (unless the roar like an angry bull counted). "I guess you do." Hari grasped the wrist that had just missed him and spun in a full circle, releasing with a hammer-throw and sending the man out

the closed window and bouncing down the lawn. "Sorry!" Hari called. "Missed your wall!"

The man was struggling to his feet and rose just in time for his daughter to hit him in the face as she was defenestrated after her attempt to punch Hari proved to him that she, too, enjoyed being able to fly under someone else's power.

"I hope you like your gift!" Hari said as he vanished in a cloud of fire.

(A/N 1 John)

Well, that's two recently. So far so good.

(A/N 2 John)

Things will only go weird from here. A plot point that developed out of something that was supposed to be just a one-off joke is going to come to fruition soon, so that's something. It only took a couple chapters, so I'm improving there.

(A/N 3 John)

On the other hand, we have at least one other major project on the burner that I want to publish and a pair of shorts that need to be topped off. So many fires and I hope to extinguish the small ones via presentation.

(A/N 4 John)

I'm sure ya'll know what Hari did with his arm. That has been in the works for quite some time. He has a relentless drive to... self improvement, shall we say? Whether or not others would agree to that being much of an improvement. Like, say, his father.

(A/N 5 John)

Not sure what else to add here. No, Hari is not asexual, but neither is he going to be completely involved with sex. One of the upsides to the Curse Mark is that it condenses all the chaos of going through puberty into a quick burst. Aside from that, Hari just has lots of other interests that keep him occupied. Mostly. I suspect Pein would be happier if his nephew were more involved in sex, just because it'd mean less chance of him going for an enthusiastic walk.

Snakes and a Joke Book

Chapter 68: Snakes and a "Joke" Book

Pein pinched the bridge of his nose, something he only did when his nephew was around (or being discussed). Part of this was because there were all those pointy rods that were uncomfortable, so he tried to avoid squeezing them. He had just spent the better part of an hour listening to Hari explain the general idea of why he had chopped off one of his own arms and attached one made out of what Pein was convinced were cloned cells from the First Hokage (as if Leaf needed *more* reasons to attack them). Hari had kept growing little trees and flowers from his hand, fingers, shoulder, and so on. It was distracting.

Somewhere in there had been more details than Pein had ever wanted to know about what Shimura Danzō had been up to over the years (it made him rather glad that freak of nature was out of the picture-the man was clearly too much of a loose cannon even for the Akatsuki). There was also the bit about excising bits of the arm that Pein was beginning to think of as Senju-putty that had included several Sharingan eyes and implanting them into the new arm for reasons Pein hadn't quite followed (unless it had been because Hari wanted to see if he could-always possible).

It wasn't until Hari piped up with "so why did you want to see me, Uncle Pein?" that he realized that they had been completely off the subject the entire time.

"I received a letter from Orochimaru." When Hari didn't respond, Pein continued, "he asks that we please return his missing research and prototypes. I'm assuming the prototype is out of the question?" Hari's nod was unsurprising. "And while I have no doubt that we could raze all of Sound to the ground and, indeed, all of Rice Country, it would be annoying to do so just because of this." Pein waited a bit longer to see if Hari picked up on where he was going with this. He didn't.

"So we are going to go to Sound and return some of the research so the nice, unstable scientist will leave us alone and focus on other projects the nature of which I am happy to remain ignorant of—that means don't speculate- or *tell* me-Hari."

"Some of it?"

"I don't want him to think we're caving completely. It would be bad for business and bad for his character. On an unrelated subject, he was most displeased about the removal of a test subject's nose. Oh, and the fact that you raided a secret base in a different country from Sound."

"Then he should have hidden it better."

"Personally, I thought it would have been more efficient to just not store Uchiha Sasuke there."

"I'd probably have ignored it, yes."

"Like I said. Back to the subject at hand: you will be going with me and your father."

"Alright."

"Go gather some of the research and meet me at the... I really wish he would wait for me to finish orders."

X

X

"Hi, Uncle Tobi."

"Hello, Hari." Tobi turned back to the book on his desk. "I'm not going to tell you again: you just aren't funny."

"But I told my best joke!" shouted the book. "I *will* make you laugh if it costs you your soul, Mister Tobi!"

"Uncle Tobi?"

"Hm?" Tobi didn't look away from the book this time.

"Can you come with me to Sound?"

"Why?"

"I'll find a better joke, Mister Tobi. You will *laugh*!" the book fairly snarled.

"Uncle Pein wants me to go there with him, but I left before he told me where to meet him."

"No, I don't think so, Hari."

"Okay."

"How about this one," the book growled. "Sixteen innocent little orphans were tied up on an altar..."

"Tobi is giving you to Hidan."

X

X

"Hey dad?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know where we're supposed to meet Uncle Pein?"

"Funnily enough, he did mention to me something about finding my son and taking him to the base of the Tower."

"Oh good. I missed it when he told me."

"Because you walked out, yes. Come on."

X

X

"Hari, remember to be on your best be..." Pein trailed off. "You know something. Just stand still next to me and your father and don't do pretty much anything."

"As I live and breathe," called Orochimaru's voice from the ramparts of Sound. "I do believe that it is Pein and the eldest Uchiha at my doorstep. Since I haven't done anything to antagonize you yet, might I ask why you're here? If you want to blow up my village, you could at least let me make your lives difficult first."

"Funny you should mention blowing up your village, Orochimaru," said Pein. "I had strongly considered that option, but I have to weigh it against the danger that you wouldn't die and I just *know* that you'd make more trouble like that than if I let you keep your village."

"You mean if I were avenging myself against you for wrecking much of what I've striven for? Yes, that's a fair assessment."

"Like I said. Still, it was tempting just to find out if you can die."

"No one has managed it yet."

"Yet indeed."

"But since you aren't here to blow up my place, what *are* you doing here? Are you in the market for some experiments to be performed on you?"

"No, but a related reason: Hari here is going to return some of your research."

"Some?"

"Uncle Pein said it's bad for your character if you get what you want," Hari offered.

"Ah."

Pein sighed. "Thank you, Hari."

"No problem, Uncle Pein." Hari held up a scroll. "Here's most of the stuff I took last time I was here."

"What do you mean 'most'?"

"I kept the stuff on the prototype seal. You had done a bad job with it anyway, so I had to fix your work."

"You what?"

"Well yeah. I got it working now though."

"Is *that* why you're full of Nature chakra?"

"If that's what it is, yes."

"He's full of WHAT?" snapped Itachi. Then he paused. "That would explain the gold skin and stuff. Huh. There's a thing."

"I'd be willing to give you your original notes for the prototype too, Snake-man!"

Orochimaru rubbed his forehead. "What'll it cost me."

"Your tongue technique."

"My what?"

"His what?" Pein and Itachi added.

"He's got a thing he does where he gets his tongue all long and stuff. Pervert Sage said it'd be really useful but that Snake-man never told him how to do it."

"Of all the things..." all three men grumbled.

"Actually, you also need to through in the neck-extending thing, too." Hari grinned. "Hurry up before I remember anything else to add to the list."

"Fine!" Orochimaru leapt down from the ramparts and stood in front of Hari. "You've got the Sharingan (lucky bastard), so I'll just do this..." he flew through a series of seals, twice. "There you go. The rest is practice, though. I can't teach you how to wield a weapon with it or anything this way-you'll need to just do it until you manage."

"Alright." Hari's neck had lengthened a bit and then retracted.

"Why did you want that one?" Orochimaru asked, genuinely curious.

"Because Pervert Sage said you didn't share that one with him either."

"No... use for it?"

"He didn't mention any."

"That is impressive; he came up with a way to use that technique of the Fourth's for sex."

"Yep. It works pretty nicely, too."

Itachi sighed, not needing to know this. "And now we take our leave, Orochimaru. Please try not to kidnap my brother a third time."

"I didn't kidnap him last time!" Orochimaru asserted. "He showed up at the gates after your son kidnapped him!"

"Nevertheless..."

"I've done lots of bad things in my life and I plan to do plenty more," Orochimaru growled. "But I didn't kidnap your brother. Either time!"

"Keep telling yourself that," said Itachi airily, mimicking the mannerisms he'd encountered in Uchiha (and wasn't *that* weird)

Naruto. He placed a hand on his son's shoulder and tugged him away from Sound.

"Good day, Orochimaru," Pein said. "Don't give me a reason to tell Deidara that Rice Country is his new test facility."

X

X

"Apros pos of nothing," Pein commented as they were walking down the road towards Rain. "Hari, you are hereby banned from leaving the Tower for destinations within the Elemental Nations without being escorted by me personally."

"Alright, Uncle Pein."

X

X

Hidan stumbled into the meeting room, his normally pale skin a waxy color that was disturbingly like sickened. In one trembling hand he clutched the 'joke book'. His face was drawn, skin pulled tight over his skull. He looked like death warmed over. "Take it back!" he demanded in a quivering voice, holding the book out to Tobi. "Take it back, please!"

Tobi cocked his head. "What's wrong, Hidan?"

"It... talks to me. Make it stop." Hidan's free hand slammed down on the book's cover, his muscles visibly bulging as he apparently strained to keep it shut.

"What's wrong, Hidan? Why don't you laugh?" A gravely voice asked from somewhere in the room. "Wasn't I funny enough?"

Hidan whimpered and flung the book at Tobi. "It's looking at me, Tobi. Make it stop looking at me!" he cried desperately.

Tobi's body language was more confused than anything. "Tobi does not understand. Tobi doesn't think books can look at Hidan."

"Hello, *Tobi*," growled the voice, a smell of sulphur filling the air. "Time to make you *laugh*!" The book sprang open and a fleshy *thing* with too many eyes began to rise from the pages.

"NO!" screamed Hidan as he dove across the room, throwing himself bodily at the text. "For the love of the gods, don't let it open!" He landed heavily on the book and slammed a kunai through it, pinning it shut as it began to shudder violently in his grip.

"Come on, you little fleshlings!" bellowed the book, brimstone stench choking the room. "Let me open. I'll make all of you laugh. What's the matter, Tobi? Don't you find me *funny*?" Greenish goo began to ooze from between the pages, dribbling down Hidan's fingers as the man began to burble helplessly.

Tobi, Pein, Konan, and Kakuzu stared at the unfolding scene with a mix of revulsion and terror.

"Tobi wants to know what Hari got Tobi."

"Please, in the name of everything holy," mumbled Hidan. "Help me stop it!" He fell face down as Kakuzu's hand impacted the back of his head.

"He was going to snap," the man explained as he shot a series of earthen spears from his hand to hold the book shut. A long tentacle slithered out of the closed text, eyes searching. The very presence of the thing was making the S-class ninja in the room break out in cold sweats and humors to drip from their eyes and ears.

"Time for a *joke*, Tobi!"

The gathered Akatsuki backed slowly away from the book as purplish flames began to lick its edges. Suddenly an orange blade pierced it. "No!" screeched the voice of a thousand damned souls.

"No, no, no! You can't seal me away forever, weaklings! I'll be back! One day I'll return to make you *laugh!* Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cth-" The book was sucked into a swirl of color and vanished on the other side of the room in a jug of ethereal sake.

Everyone stared at Itachi as He Who Helps Beyond All Means faded. The man still had his feet propped up on a desk and was turning a page in a book. He didn't look up as he spoke, "it was disrupting my reading."

Hidan's head rose, saw the book in Itachi's hands, emitted a horrible wail, and fell to the ground, foaming at the mouth.

"Great," muttered Kakuzu. " Now we'll teach him to read."

Pein and Tobi were staring blankly at the spot where the book had been before being sucked into Itachi's He Who Helps Beyond All Means. They looked at each other.

"Tobi is very disturbed by what Hari got him."

"You and me both."

"Tobi thinks you should have a word with Hari. Please ask him not to get Tobi more books. Tobi is unsure if Tobi would survive."

"I think I will. Has anyone seen Hari recently?"

"Not in about a week, Leader-Sama," said Itachi from the depths of his book.

Pein froze. Icy terror clawed at his heart as he imagined the chaos that his nephew was no doubt unleashing on the world. He took a deep breath. "No, no. He couldn't be out and about; I'm right here and he needed... to be... escorted... by..." he trailed off in horror. "Where is my Animal Path?" he asked suddenly. Pein had a vacant look on his face for a moment, then pants-shitting-fear replaced it.
"WHY IS THE TSUCHIKAGE LOOKING AT ME?"

X

X

==OuTtAkE==

"Hi, Pansy!" Hari leaned to the side to avoid the disembowelment curse from Mister Parkinson. He kicked his foot out, sending a knife spinning through the air and stabbing into the man's wrist, pinning it to the wall. Ten feet behind him, dragging the unfortunate man along by a dislocated shoulder.

"Hari. You just appeared in a cloud of fire." Pansy had adapted rather well all things considered. Given that Draco Malfoy was in the hospital wing often, she had needed to make friends with the people this crazy boy had forced on her. Even the mudblood had merit, if only because as much as she disliked admitting it, Granger was a bonafide genius. She wasn't *used* to this insanity by any stretch of the imagination, but she was better able to accept it. Besides, her parents weren't nice people, so she had no difficulty understanding someone capriciously making her do things she didn't want to.

"How else does one appear when using a phoenix to travel?" Hari sounded genuinely mystified.

"I suppose you have a point there," she granted. "But what in the hell are you doing here?" She watched as her mother resisted the urge to curse her new not-quite-friend and instead went to help her husband, who was cursing a blue streak.

"I thought it would be good if I gave you your presents."

"You shouldn't have. Seriously."

"But I did. I'd hate it to go to waste." He pointed towards the door. "They're outside on the lawn. Make sure you learn to use them or I'll train you."

"The words aren't terrifying, but somehow I am scared nevertheless."

"That's a healthy way to think. Your father uses some impressive words."

"I've never heard them from his mouth before."

"I guess I'm special?"

"Something like that."

"Bye, Pansy!"

(A/N John)

I return to the fic that got me started publishing. I plan to next finish the two-shot that's been waiting to be worked on and then put out the next chapter of *Strings*. After that I plan to alternate between those two. Probably two chapters of *Itachi* to one of *Strings*.

(A/N 2 John)

As I promised, the insanity level has continued to grow. Every time I think I've bottomed out, I discover new depths into which I can delve. Spoon would prefer I make some sort of dirty joke here, but I am above that. Plowing it.

(A/N 3 John)

I couldn't help myself. Or, should I say, I didn't bother to. Yeah, that's more accurate.

(A/N 4 John)

Want to know the crazy thing? Having written a chapter where a sentient book goes violently insane and starts summoning an eldritch horror from Beyond The Realms Of Sanity, the next

chapter contains what I think might be the crackiest thing I've put into this story so far. Be amused-erm, afraid.

(A/N 5 John)

I can't *wait* for Fourth Year proper to start. I have a feeling it will be short only because whenever I think something will be long, it's short, but I promise a great deal of insanity and a properly high body count. Not enough people died during Third Year. We're going to fix that.

Interrogation

Chapter 69: Interrogation

"What are you talking about, Leader-Sama?" asked Itachi, not looking up from his book.

"I can see the Tsuchikag-isn't Oonoki the one with Dust relea-yes," Pein's voice rose an octave or two. "Fuck. There goes the Animal path." He paused. "Why was I looking at the Tsuchikage and what idiocy did your son get up to that got the man so all-fired angry at me?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Leader-Sama."

X

X

Pein spent the next week trying to work out what his nephew was up to and avoiding the roundabout methods required for the Tsuchikage to reach him to demand answers. Since he didn't have any to give and didn't feel like admitting it, the only policy worth adhering to was to not have to do any answering. Besides, he didn't need a war with Rock any more than he did with Leaf. So far, Oonoki had been making threatening noises but didn't seem inclined to escalate to threatening actions. That was for the best.

Sasori had only a handful of reports of someone breaking into secure areas in villages. It was enough that Pein suspected Hari was working in clockwise order around the continent. He could assume, therefore, that any village without such a report was probably lacking in security-it wouldn't be like his nephew not to be thorough and, incidentally, create as much chaos as possible.

"Leader-Sama?" Itachi poked his head into Pein's office where the man was forced to work on a small card table because his desk was

still occupied by cinderparrot. "I found what you've been looking for." The Uchiha stepped sideways and from around the corner appeared Hari, his arm held tightly by his father. His other hand held an arm tightly, slightly decomposed and still wearing an Akatsuki cloak's sleeve. "He just turned up."

"Hi, Uncle Pein."

Pein scowled. "Didn't I say you weren't to leave the tower for business in the Elemental Nations without a personal escort by me?"

Hari held up the arm. "You were with me." A pause. "Well, some of you was." The next moment, Hari was absently holding the Deva Path's hands as it tried to get through his guard and strangle him. "Damn. You made me drop you."

Itachi coughed and Pein froze before slowly stepping back. "That is not what I'd had in mind. Regardless, would you care to explain why the Tsuchikage was attacking me?"

X

X

Hari was sitting at the Tsuchikage's desk, a pile of scrolls strewn about him haphazardly. Many of them were opened only partway and then tossed aside with complete disregard for their contents or integrity. At the moment, he was making a careful study of the one scroll that had been relevant to his interests.

It had taken more time than he wished to access the hidden scroll room in the building, so he was running late. As a result, the Tsuchikage was already on his way back from the meeting. Hari had expected it to take the man longer to finish arranging the trade agreement and had budgeted more time than this. If he finished, he wouldn't have time to put everything back the way he had in other villages.

His free hand held Uncle Pein, making sure that he didn't get left behind.

The Tsuchikage opened the door and his face turned into a mask of fury.

X

X

"Hari..." Pein said after a moment. "Why didn't you put everything back and, I hate the idea of giving you this suggestion, just break in again?"

"That would have put me behind schedule."

"Itachi. Get him out of here. He can explain what he was up to later."

"But you'll think this is really cool, Uncle Pein!"

"OUT!"

X

X

"Uchiha Sasuke." Tsunade's voice was practically arctic as she addressed the sometimes-genin in front of her. "Do you know why I've called you to my office?"

"If this has anything to do with paperwork, I'm leaving it off until Naruto can handle it for me."

"While that is an unacceptable plan-

"I figure I can turn things back over to him in about another week..."

"I was more interested in discussing your nephew."

"Can we talk about paperwork, please?" Sasuke said, face in his hand.

"No. I'm probably going to regret revealing a village secret to someone with a propensity for going missing, but otherwise I can't get your insight. You see, I walked in on your nephew about three days ago. He was in the area with the Forbidden Scroll and was, in fact, reading it."

"So the village still has massive security holes. Considering that several dangerous individuals seem to wander through on a regular basis, I'm not sure that qualifies as much of a revelation. This would be the third time my nephew has done it in as many years. And I'm pretty sure my brother and Hoshigake Kisame came in three years ago. So did Orochimaru and a giant army. To tell the truth, I think it's an improvement to have limited the last two years to just my nephew."

Through Sasuke's little analysis, Tsunade's face had grown more and more grim. "Be that as it may," each word was ground out. "What I was hoping you could help with was what he was doing there."

"He was probably stealing something. Especially if it's unique or irreplaceable. He does that to Orochimaru. Twice at least. He has busy sprees, doesn't he?"

"That's the problem. Nothing is missing."

"How odd. He made off with two highly valuable branches of Orochimaru's research. Does that mean there wasn't anything worth taking in the Forbidden Scroll or any of the other things secreted away with it?"

Tsunade remained silent, glaring.

"That's rather sad, if you think about it. Maybe you should look into developing something impressive so that it'd be worth his time?"

"Now what was that about you turning things over to Naruto? I demand you reveal to me where his clones are hiding."

Sasuke's response was to slip between the two ANBU restraining him and out the window before they could recover.

"ANBU," snarled Tsunade.

"We'll catch him, Lady Tsunade."

"Fuck that. Go find those clones!"

X

X

"Hari." Pein and Tobi stood in Hari's doorway, glaring.

"Yes?" Hari was neck-deep in piles of paper covered in apparently random scribblings.

"We wish to talk to you about the gift you got Tobi."

"What about it?"

"Well..." began Pein.

"The thing was fucking scary." Tobi's voice was hard and brittle. "It made some truly horrifying threats to my person and those around me. And it tried to curse me."

"It did? But it was a children's joke book. A little amateurish, but not that bad."

"Nevertheless," snarled Tobi.

"Pein?" Kakazu called from downstairs. "Hidan wasn't able to make the kill again."

"THERE WERE BOOKS IN THERE!" screamed Hidan.

Pein sighed. "How did this happen. Seriously. You've managed to psychologically scar someone devoted to violent murder and nothing else. How."

"Is something wrong with Uncle Hidan?"

Pein turned and stomped out of the room. Tobi twitched. "No books. Got it?"

"Yes, Uncle Tobi."

"I just know I missed something in that instruction." Tobi left.

X

X

"Hari."

"Yeah, dad?" Hari looked up from staring at his new hand.

"Leader-Sama has asked me to talk to you about a little problem he's having."

"Yeah?"

"He's decided to include one of the training grounds in your confinement." Hari cocked his head to the side. "You are allowed to use Training Ground Seven without needing Leader-Sama to accompany you."

"Okay."

"In fact, he would appreciate it if you would move there promptly."

"Why?"

Itachi looked at the giant tree taking up much of the room and which had, in fact, begun to take over a large portion of the tower with huge roots and branches. "I couldn't say."

X

X

"I've been meaning to ask," Itachi said as he sat on a branch of one of many new trees that had colonized Training Ground Seven. Each was a massive thing dwarfing all but the freaks in Training Ground Forty-Four back in Leaf. Thankfully, Hari hadn't imported any of the fauna from there, or Leader-Sama would be most upset. "Why did you implant the extra Sharingan into your arm?"

Hari glanced up from glaring at the trunk extending out of his palm. It was already putting down thick roots and beginning to twine itself with the others he'd created. "Well, I figured that Danzō had them for a reason, so I might want them also."

"Do you know the reason?" Itachi asked, worried his son had come across one of the darker secrets of their clan.

"Not a clue. But it's really weird to see out of my upper arm."

"You can see out of them?"

"Yeah. I don't know why he kept them closed. Open is useful, once I get used to it. I still trip a bit because I'm getting the hang of the new perspective."

"They won't be a weak point in a fight?"

"Nah. They have some sort of hard film over them." Hari pulled a kunai and stabbed one of the eyes, demonstrating how the point glanced off the orb. "It does that for the whole arm, actually." He gave a few more examples. "I can't even scratch it without wind chakra."

"Did it do that before you attached it?"

"Nah. I was a little concerned about that, actually. Now I wish I knew how to armor the rest of me without having to chop off more parts."

"I think it might just be the sage chakra."

"Oh. Right." Hari jabbed his thigh. "So that drew a little blood. My new arm is definitely stronger."

"Please stop stabbing yourself."

"But it barely drew blood!"

"Nevertheless. I posit that it is the sage chakra going through your new arm. Please do not go and armor yourself with the stuff."

"Okay, dad."

"Thank you." Itachi casually leaned to the side as a tree limb sliced through the space he had occupied and tangled into the new forest canopy. "Still having trouble with control?"

"Sort of. I can stop it from growing things, but I can't control what it grows."

"Well, that's something to work on then."

"Mhmm."

"How soon do you need to get back to the other world?"

"Probably tomorrow."

X

X

"Lady Tsunade!"

"Shizune. What's wrong? Wait, wait." Tsunade held up a hand, then rummaged around the pile of bottles that held her paperwork and found one with some sake left. She drained it and let it drop. "Now tell me."

"What makes you think something is wrong?"

"You're hiding behind my ANBU commander, for one thing."

"I like his butt?"

"That's nice. Tell me the bad news."

"Uchiha Sasuke..."

"Has fled the village. Do you have anything *new* to tell me?"

"You knew ?"

"Well, I expected. I just finished reviewing another load of paperwork signed by 'acting head of the Uchiha, Uchiha Naruto', so I felt it was a safe bet that he was now actively going to make headaches again."

"Yes, Lady Tsunade."

"But at least we can just go retrieve him and lay waste to Sound now."

"How will we do that, my Lady?" asked the ANBU commander, not sure how he could politely explain to the apprentice of his superior that he was in a relationship already and would she please remove her hands from his rear.

"Well, I was thinking of sending a couple of squads of your ANBU and maybe toss in Kakashi and Gai to be certain of it."

"An excellent plan; only I meant that I wasn't sure how we would achieve your goals."

"I'm missing something, aren't I?"

"We don't, in fact, know where Sound is."

Tsunade blinked. "How is that possible?"

"Well, we weren't told..."

"Yes, but Uchiha Sasuke made several visits to T&I. How could we not know where Orochimaru's bases are?"

"He refused to answer, Lady Tsunade."

"Get me Ibiki."

X

X

"Ibiki, Inoichi," Tsunade purred, her smile not at all friendly. "Would my esteemed officers of interrogation and information gathering care to explain why one of the most important ninja to pass through their custody recently failed to divulge key intelligence?"

"He refused to answer, my Lady," Ibiki replied, staring straight ahead and slightly to the left of Tsunade's head.

"I'm not sure why that matters, Ibiki. You are a *torturer*. I trust you know how to extract information from reluctant subjects. For that matter," she glared at Inoichi, "you are able to just enter someone's mind and retrieve the information required."

"About that, Lady Tsunade..." Inoichi looked a little sheepish and a lot scared.

"This had better be good."

"He claimed jurisdiction."

"What."

"He pointed out that as head of the Uchiha and, more importantly, head of the Leaf's Military Police, interrogation of captured missing ninja is the purview of the Police. He handled it himself and turned in the reports as per the law."

Tsunade's face twitched. "I must have misheard you. I think you just said that you let a priority prisoner *interrogate himself* and write the reports."

"It was his right as head of the Military Police. Doubly so since matters involving Uchiha default to them."

X

X

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ibiki growled at the boy-teenager-in heavy chains. The manacles on his arms were locked to the table and those on his legs were attached to the chair.

"I think I spoke quite clearly," Sasuke said with a decidedly calm voice for someone facing the tender non-mercies of Morino Ibiki. "I am head of the Uchiha clan and also acting head of the Leaf's Military Police. All actions involving captured Leaf ninja are matters for the Military Police. Furthermore, I am an Uchiha and Leaf's charter clearly states that all matters involving an Uchiha are the realm of the Military Police as well. Hence, I would ask you to please unchain me so that I can interrogate the prisoner."

"I don't think that's..." Ibiki was interrupted by one of his chūnin, who handed him a piece of paper. "But that's absurd!" he snapped. "He's the prisoner."

"If you claim I'm not really the head, you could always have my interrogation handled by Uchiha Naruto. Of course, that would be by mail, so it might take some time. And I suspect that he would insist

that I not be chained up for the duration. It would probably be faster if you just let me do my job, Morino."

Ibiki stared at the boy. This could not be happening. "Fine. I'll get a Yamanaka and—" he broke off when the boy's chained hand waved a finger.

"Ah, ah," Sasuke said with a grin. "Unless turned over to T&I by the Military Police, it's a crime to use those techniques on members of that organization or those in their care. Take, for example, an Uchiha accused of a crime."

Ibiki's mouth worked silently as he tried to find some way that he could do his job.

"Do you mind hurrying it up? You're interfering with a Police investigation. I don't think you want to be charged with that, do you? Unless you want to find out what the Military Police do to prisoners with their Sharingan?"

Ibiki glared.

"Now please unchain me." Sasuke waited for the man to do so. "Thank you. And now, some privacy, please? I'd like to interrogate the prisoner."

"You have to be shitting me."

"Certainly not. Military Police investigations are confidential. Only the Hokage gets the reports. In this case, I think I can be persuaded to give you copies of them. Professional courtesy and all that."

Ibiki listened to the door slam behind him and then heard the sound of the chair being ripped from its moorings and slammed onto the table. "ALRIGHT, YOU SHIT EATING TRAITOR!" screamed Sasuke from inside the room. "ARE YOU GOING TO TALK? TOO LATE!" There was the sound of metal hitting flesh. "HOW ABOUT NOW? WE HAVE WAYS OF MAKING YOU TALK!" On and on it went.

Ibiki had dozed off to the peaceful sounds of a brutal, if insane, interrogation and woke when he heard the door open. Uchiha Sasuke emerged from the room bloody and bruised with his clothing torn and both arms dislocated. A clone had a firm hand on one shoulder.

"I gave him everything I could think of, Morino," it said politely. It kicked Sasuke in the calf. "I'll give him another go tomorrow, perhaps you have some suggestions for things I could use? In the meantime, he's confined to Leaf and its environs." It smacked Sasuke upside the head. "Now get out."

On his way out, Sasuke gave Ibiki a cheeky smile. "Bye, Morino!"

X

X

"You had to be there, my Lady."

"The fact that he himself is technically a missing ninja doesn't change that?"

"Well, no, Lady Tsunade. Legally he hasn't permanently designated Uchiha Naruto as head of the clan or Military Police, so while he's in the village, he's in charge."

*"Are you telling me that *Itachi* could do that?"*

"Oh no, Lady Tsunade. The head of the Uchiha officially removed Uchiha Itachi from headship of the clan for the murder of the previous head."

"Thank heavens for small favors! Get out."

X

X

==OUttaKE==

Dan Granger walked to the door of the small suburban home he shared with his wife and daughter. There had been a polite knock, which wasn't so odd, but it had been in the middle of Christmas day. That was unusual. Why would anyone come visiting today of all days... he was planning to tell whomever it was to kindly go the hell away. He wouldn't even do that much, but the gentle knocking had been going on for three hours and had begun to alter the functioning of the family's thinking as it went on and on in a constant drone.

He flung the door open to see no one standing there. The knocking on the door continued. He whirled around to see that there was nothing touching the door but his own hand. The sound continued to repeat over and over. While he stared, a boy with black hair strolled into his house and into the sitting room where his wife and child were covering their ears with their hands and humming loudly.

"Merry Christmas, Hermione." Hari waved at the girl.

"YOU!" she snarled and went to try and strangle him, only to put her hands back to help drown out the sound.

"I hope you're well. I got you a present." Hari pointed at the door behind him. "Motivation."

"WHAT?"

"Now you'll practice your wandless magic so you can dispel the door." Hari patted Hermione on the shoulder and vanished in a cloud of flame.

(A/N John)

We're back! I was feeling poorly for a bit and Spoon's going to be busier than she had been, but we plan to continue to post.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, I've been having a bit of a hangup on the oneshot I have in the works, so that may end up getting a back seat for a bit and instead *Itachi* and *Strings* will have my attention. Maybe I'll feel like writing the oneshot again soon.

(A/N 3 John)

I really, really loved writing the scene with Ibiki. It was one of those things that just started as a little idea, but I had to write it so that everyone could see the crazy that had spawned in my head.

(A/N 4 John)

And so Fourth Year is about to begin. We have laid in a supply of body bags, since we're going to have piles of corpses. This will be most amusing to me. We also have some other things that people didn't see coming. I promise.

Summer Continues

Chapter 70: Summer Continues

"Bye, dad!"

"Goodbye, son." Itachi watched his son disappear.

"Itachi." Pein's voice was dry. "Did you ever find out what it was he was doing all over the Elemental Nations?"

"Something about wanting a summoning contract, Leader-Sama."

"It cannot possibly be something so innocuous."

Itachi sighed. "You may be right, Leader-Sama."

"Anyway, come to the planning room. We're coming up on the time when all the pieces are in play. Give it a few months and we'll want to be ready."

"Understood, Leader-Sama."

X

X

"Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto knocked on the doorframe of the lab, reminding his lord that there were worldly concerns that needed addressing. "I feel compelled to mention that Uchiha Sasuke has moved back into his old rooms and killed three of your servants who made snide remarks."

"He's back?" Orochimaru looked distinctly uneasy.

"I believe so. It certainly looked like him with blood on his sword and a gibbering member of your bodyguard at his feet while he poked

holes in another of your protection because you just *had* to pick rude ones."

"Sound is made up of the dregs, damn it!" snarled Orochimaru. "If I want skill, I have to be willing to deal with rude!"

"Not enough skill, either, Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto smiled his not-at-all-creepy-honest smile.

"Yes, well, I blame you for their lack of training." Orochimaru sighed. He wasn't entirely certain he wanted the Uchiha around anymore. He definitely would make an excellent replacement body, but the boy came with that nephew and, also, a collection of protective uncles who had already made trouble for him. It was almost looking like it would be easier to just collect some of the boy's sperm and breed some new Uchiha. That was a thought. "Kabuto, encourage Sasuke to spend 'quality time' with our available females."

"I don't think he enjoys watching movies or walks in the park, my lord."

"Kabuto?"

"Yes?"

"Tell him if he's horny, he should fuck our breeding stock."

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama."

X

X

The snake sage sighed and rubbed his face. Sometimes he wondered if it would have been easier to just stay on the right side of the Hokage and just stay in Leaf. On the other hand, he wouldn't be himself if he didn't push the limits of what was morally acceptable and, more importantly, didn't run the risk of annihilating his own sanity with some experiment.

He was so lost in thought as he returned to his experiment that he only just dodged the hail of electrically-charged needles that barraged his research facility. "Hello, Sasuke. I gather Kabuto told you to train?"

"Indeed." There was the sound of a sword being drawn. It was silken and if Orochimaru hadn't been one of the greatest geniuses of the ninja world, he would have missed it under the boy's voice. As it was, he was forced to move awkwardly to draw his grass cutter and block the lightning-blade in a flurry of fluid strikes.

The combatants paused as a bird appeared in a cloud of flame and dropped a katana that was just a little large for Sasuke into the boy's hands. There was a note wrapped around the hilt.

"Dear uncle Sasuke," he read aloud. "Sorry I forgot to give this to you when I saw you last. Hope you're still in Leaf. Best, Uchiha Hari. P.S. I got you one a little bigger than you need now so you can keep using it when you grow."

Sasuke shrugged. Orochimaru was watching with fascination, so Sasuke drew the blade and experimentally moved it in a few basic forms. Electricity crackled from his fingers down the blade.

"Holy shit." At the sound of Orochimaru's voice, Sasuke dropped into a ready stance, the sword blurring through a defensive pattern. "When you hold the blade at certain angles, I can't see you. Yeah, like that. Shit." The sound of birds grew louder as the Uchiha in front of Orochimaru began to randomly blink in and out of visibility while attacking. This was doing nothing for his mellow.

X

X

"Why can't you be more like my treasured apprentice?" Jiraiya demanded as they left the brothel.

"Because I'm not catatonic with hormones, old man?"

"This is true. But you'd think you'd at least be a *little* more interested. I even took you to a gay brothel!"

"I'm not gay, pervert. I just didn't feel like screwing people twice my age."

"I don't mind that they're a third *my* age, brat!"

"I can't even begin to answer that one."

"Look, I realize that you have some sort of notion of romance or propriety or something, but you *need* this training. You want to be Hokage, yes?"

"Well, I'm not sure I can be, since I'm an Uchiha."

"Like you'd let a little detail stop you in pursuit of a goal."

"This is true."

"Well, the Hokage needs to be able to resist seduction. Besides, it'd piss off Tsunade."

"Why do you try to piss her off? Don't you like having your balls?"

"Kid, if she were really mad at me, I'd be a pile of meat on the ground. That's how you know she adores me."

"Or you're just really resilient the same way I am."

"That too. What was the letter you sent to Tsunade a week ago? She sent me a letter with literal acid bile in it."

"Well, she wanted me to question one Uchiha Sasuke regarding the location of Sound."

"Wouldn't that be Ibiki's problem?"

"Setting aside the fact that Sasuke isn't in Leaf anymore? No. He's Uchiha, so that makes it a Military Police matter. I'm acting chief of police, so that means it's my job. But Sasuke already handled the interrogation while he was in Leaf, so I don't see any reason to reopen a closed case just because the Hokage doesn't like the answers the prisoner gave."

"What."

"We're not barbarians, horny-toad sage. We don't just continue interrogations until prisoners say what we'd like to hear. Besides," Naruto pointed out, "if we were going to do that, we could save some trouble and just decide they said what we wanted to hear so we could move on."

"But..."

"Look. The head of the Military Police already interrogated the prisoner. I'm not going to cast aspersions on his abilities as an officer! I wouldn't want him to do that to me. It's rude. Besides, he's a Leaf ninja and as a comrade, I'm supposed to trust his skills to get the job done when he's assigned to it, right?"

"Technically..."

"Good."

"What about the fact that he left Leaf again?"

"He'll probably be back in a few months. It's like a vacation. Besides, we have no proof of that."

"He's not in the village!"

"I'm not sure how to prove a negative, horny-toad."

"You could at least *call* me 'sage', brat!"

"Nah. Ow!" Naruto's exclamation of pain was because he'd just been swatted into a tree.

"Get your lazy rear down here. We only have a few months before we have to go back to Leaf. You have training to do!"

"Slavedriver." Naruto created a thousand clones, all of whom jogged off into the forest to practice technique chains. It was probably unfair to abuse his ability to do this, but, you know, ninja.

"And you have practice summoning to do."

"Yeah, yeah."

X

X

"Hey, Hari!" Millie waved the unconscious prisoner in her hand at her friend when he appeared in a ball of fire. "Could you hit that one over there? Thanks. He's death-row, so that worked out." She proceeded to smack several other people with her human club.

"Summer job going well?" Hari asked. He absently kicked a man in the face hard enough to cause much of his torso to explode in a shower of gore.

"Damn it, Hari! That one wasn't supposed to die!"

"Then he should have dodged."

Millie sighed and threw an unconscious prisoner into a group of them. She surveyed the drifts of beaten people and grinned. She called out in a thick, badly accented foreign language.

"What was that?" Hari asked.

"French. They asked to borrow me for the riot."

"So you're now becoming internationally known?"

"I guess?"

"Cool. Can I put you on staff, then? We'll handle the details." Hari held out a card.

"Sure."

"Neat. I'll have the word put out that I have someone who specializes in nonlethal."

"You don't have to say it like it's a dirty word, Hari."

"Isn't it?"

Millie sighed and waved over the warden. Her French was slow and clumsy compared to the rapid-fire pace of the native speakers, but it was more than enough for them to communicate their desire to know who the heck had just appeared in the middle of their jail. "I think they'd like you to leave since you're not supposed to be here."

"Why would that matter?"

"Out."

"Fine, fine." Hari gave the warden a cheery wave.

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Hari stopped off in the museum again with as much casual ease as he'd had the last time he was there. It was simple enough to pick up the rest of his shopping list, and he made sure to leave behind a few things to let them know it was him again.

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"Good morning, Tracy!"

"Hari!" snapped the redhead. "This is a hospital!"

"Mhmm?"

"A *muggle* hospital!"

"And?"

"You just appeared in a ball of flame."

Hari waved off the growl of annoyance. "Your baby brother's a little early. Still, it looks like it's going smoothly."

"It's started already?"

"Yep. Looks like easy births." Hari sat himself in a hospital chair, apparently perfectly comfortable despite the seat being made of some sort of plastic.

"What do you mean 'births'?"

"I think I spoke pretty clearly. It can be hard to tell that there's more than one as early as I saw. I hope you like being an older sibling. Oh my. Your mother seems to be quite put out with your father. Impressive, how she got a firearm into the delivery room."

"She didn't..."

"Your father handed it to her; it isn't loaded, but it seems to be helping her calm down a little bit."

Tracy covered her face with her hands. At least no one seemed to be paying attention to the fact that Hari had appeared suddenly. She'd take what she could get. Besides, they all seemed a little more concerned about the woman waving the gun in the delivery room.

That might explain it. She was going to have to take special care with her siblings to ensure they didn't grow up to be as gun-happy as her mother. It wasn't good for her heart.

X

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Daphne and Astoria waved to Hari as he walked into the sun room from the lawn. They didn't ask what he was doing there. It seemed a given that Hari liked to visit a couple of times a year; Daphne had just gotten used to it and Astoria liked seeing him.

"Hi, Hari!" Astoria was about to jump up when a hand on her wrist kept her seated.

"Let him come over and sit down," snapped Daphne. "Just for once."

Hari plopped himself down in the seat across from the sisters.

"How's the summer treating you two?"

"Aside from my sister's nundu teething on the trees? Fine."

"They don't make magical things for nundu to use for that?"

"Most people don't keep nundu as pets."

"Well most people are silly that way." Hari leaned down and scratched the cub under the chin. It was already the size of a great dane and showed no sign of shrinking. "I guess I'll have to figure something out then."

Daphne watched in what would have once been disbelief but was now resignation as Hari ignored the nundu's breath completely. At this point, she was coming to accept that the normal rules didn't apply to Hari. It was one thing to consciously be aware of it, but her unconscious responses were no longer as shocked either.

"If there's nothing else, I have a few more stops to make and then still have a project before school starts."

"Nothing I can think of." Daphne watched him vanish. Now all she had to deal with in the way of a peaceful few weeks was her sister. That was going to be sufficient challenge without external difficulties.

X

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"Hi, Hari!" Pansy called.

Sirius's head slammed into the side of the motorcycle. He'd been working with the girl to polish the chrome and retune the engine. Sure you could do it with magic, but it wasn't as satisfying as doing it by hand. As such, he'd jumped at the abrupt greeting. That wasn't good to do when one's head was pointed at the side of a large, metal object.

"Ow!" Sirius clutched his head and began to mutter curses. It wouldn't do to offend the idiots putting him up for the summer because they thought he was a mass murderer. They had grudgingly accepted that as the right hand of You-Know-Who, if he thought that riding around on a motorcycle was a good idea then it was allowed. He didn't think they'd appreciate him swearing since their daughter already had a truly filthy mouth.

Pansy had been cleaning her gun and her fingers were slick with gun oil and she had the parts of her weapon arrayed around her. With Hari present, she quickly finished and reassembled her firearm, reloading it and chambering a round.

"Good, good," he said absently. "Disappointment, have you enchanted her bike yet?"

"He means you," Pansy clarified when Sirius didn't respond. "He's sad you're not, well, what he thought." She didn't want to say

anything that might somehow get back to her parents. As it was, Sirius had made it clear he was probably going to have to clear out towards the end of the summer when his name was cleared.

"I figured as much," Sirius replied. "But I long ago stopped responding to that term. It's not even the first time I was called that for the same reason. You'd get along great with my mother, Hari."

"Nah. She's dead. So, did you enchant the bike?"

"Of course!" Sirius sounded offended at the question. "What do you take me for? Don't answer that. It's got the whole suite of charms and effects. We've had a chunk of time. Why she wanted it to have a field of bullet-proofing is beyond me."

"I also installed a pair of forward-facing fixed-placement machineguns and a rear-mounted flak-gun." Pansy shrugged. "I didn't actually *want* them, but I figured you'd complain if I didn't arm it."

"This is true." Hari frowned. "You went a little light on the weaponry."

"Well, I did want to actually have it resemble a bike when I was done. And I was going to have nowhere to sit with all the weapon controls if I put more on."

"Another project for me, then."

"Not on my bike, Hari!" When he didn't respond, Pansy went on. "I want you to agree, Hari. No experimenting on my bike!"

"I have my own," he replied before vanishing.

"That wasn't an agreement, Hari!"

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Blaise looked up and gave Hari a nod before going back to his book. He didn't bother to say anything when his friend decided to take a seat on the other end of the couch. His reading would be interrupted soon enough, so there was no reason to do so prematurely.

"*Hari*," purred Circe as she sashayed into the room. She put an extra sway to her hips as she approached him, only to find herself almost stumble at the very... appraising look he gave her. She wasn't used to feeling naked in front of someone and his gaze looked right through her and evaluated everything.

Blaise looked up in confusion as Hari walked up to his mother. She was not a tall woman and Hari had done some growing, so they were almost the same height. He moved strangely. It reminded him of his mother, actually. Then his friend leaned in and whispered something before disappearing, leaving his mother... blushing. It was a little trickier to tell with their complexion, but she was flushed.

"Hari just flirted with you, didn't he?" he said mildly. Then he flushed with rage. "I'll kill him!"

His mother waved him to silence with a sort of goofy smile on her face. "No, no. That's not necessary." Her face turned predatory. "I think it'll be interesting when he visits for Christmas."

Blaise snarled.

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"Hermione, I want to apologize."

"Hello, Hari-you *what*?"

"I didn't mean to embarrass you when I popped in while you were changing."

"Oh. You couldn't have waited until I was out of the shower for this?"

"Notice how I'm not facing you or your mirror?"

Hermione sighed. "I suppose it's an improvement."

"Yeah. I'll go say hello to your parents."

"Hari..." Hermione rubbed her forehead as he walked out of the bathroom and called to her father.

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==OUTTAke==

Dumbledore scratched his chin. The new bodyguard for the Potter boy was turning out to be a massive headache, but one that appeared perfectly capable of warding off attacks. So it was best to take the good with the bad. It would normally be costing him a fortune to pay the boy, but at least dear Nicholas had donated his stone to the cause, so gold wasn't a problem.

It was time to use the stone to make his monthly payment to the greedy bastard he'd summoned. He unlocked the warded room and then the further warded safe and used his blood to disable the locks on the package itself and found a lump of quartz on a white glove.

The next thing he knew, he was staring at the ceiling of the Hospital Wing.

(A/N John)

It's been a while since we published. Spoon is busier in the evenings than she had been, so we're spending less time writing. We had time today, so here's a chapter. I'm going to try to get around to writing on my own, but it's harder to remember without her here.

(A/N 2 John)

There have been definite changes in Hari. There are, however, distressingly more similarities. In some ways, he's more dangerous than before and in many, he's just the way he's always been. To put it another way: sex is fun for him, but it's not the driving force that it is for much of humanity.

(A/N 3 John)

If you want us to publish more often, tell Spoon she needs to remind me more. Or get free in the evenings for more than an hour.

(A/N 4 John)

But no, we're not dead and we're not abandoning this story. We have too much planned out. And never fear, the corpses are coming soon. I plan to make up for the relative lack of death in Third Year.

Someone Who Will Not Die

Chapter 71: In Which We Meet Someone Who Will Not Die

"Hey, Professor Wayne!"

Snape sighed and rubbed his eyes. Why his most troublesome... student... had decided to visit him during the summer again was... oh. Right. "I have had only limited success with the project you gave me. I am beginning to suspect that there may be an inherent property in it that causes the lethal effects. If that is the case, you would need to contact an alchemist rather than a potions master. And probably someone on the level of Nicholas Flamel-ohshit." He watched as Potter vanished in a cloud of fire and realized that it would be best if he never mentioned that it was his idea to send Hari Potter into the Immortal Alchemist's path. Especially if it ever got to Perenelle.

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"Ah, Professor Potter." The voice was aged, but contained a strength that put Hari in mind of some of the older ninja, the ones for whom age just meant that they hardened like oak. "Your presence in my highly warded study is remarkable only in that it has taken you so long to violate my privacy."

Hari found a well dressed House Elf (or, rather, wearing evening dress. It fit well, but the creature was ugly enough to offset the otherwise elegant clothing) ushering him to a plush armchair that he casually sat on the back of to avoid the spells inlaid on the cushions. He was a little put off by this, though. He had not been expecting a warm welcome. At the least, the man should be a little surprised.

"I know most people don't put stock in Divination," the man went on, "and I only believe it works in the short term, no matter what Brian believes. So I thought you might appreciate some raw fish instead of the kippers I was going to have for breakfast."

Hari blinked and waved away the Elf with the food. He wasn't eating *anything* this man offered him. Considering the number of compulsions layered on the cup of water he was avoiding, there was too good a chance that he would be dealing with poisons he didn't want to worry about. "Nah. I have to ask: how far ahead do your divinations see?"

"Far enough." The man came out from behind a stack of books, revealing that his body, unlike his voice, was quite different from his age. He was a boyish man, with features no older than twenty-five. His hair and beard were cut in a style that would fit into a painting from the time of Elizabeth I, though his dressing gown had the mark of Savile Row and a date from only two years gone. The pipe was clearly an affectation, since despite the ornate design, a stream of bubbles billowed upwards from the bowl. His brown eyes twinkled, though not as brightly as Dumbledore's. "I know that if I continue to try and hit you with a compulsion spell, you'll just kill me out of hand. Or worse."

"True."

Flamel laughed expansively, deep and resonating. "At least you're honest. To tell the truth, all the compulsions in the house are intended to prevent the theft of the Philosopher's Stone."

"I wasn't planning to steal it. If I were, there's nothing you could do to stop me."

"Probably true. I don't want to test. Though I have to ask: if you're not here to rob me, why are you here?"

"To kidnap you."

The man blinked and sat in an armchair. "That's uncommon. It must be thirty years since someone tried that. Could I convince you to tell me why?"

"Well, Professor Wayne is having trouble with a project I assigned him and he said that it might need an alchemist."

"And you're kidnapping me to give Professor Snape aid with homework?"

"Yep."

"Well, if you'll give me a minute or two so I can collect my traveling alchemy set?"

Hari waved permission and began to take books off the shelves and memorize them. They had nothing at all to do with alchemy and most were comic books, but it never hurt to know what an immortal genius liked to read for pleasure. Who knew when it would come in handy. In fact... Hari made a note to stop in a few places during his summer travels.

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Snape blinked when Nicholas Flamel walked into his home and gave him a hug. "Severus, my boy! I understand you're having trouble with summer homework?"

Snape didn't bother to correct the man. There were few enough people who actually liked him, for one thing. For another, the man was even harder to disabuse of a notion than Dumbledore-at least the Headmaster was a pragmatist much of the time; Flamel had long since transcended normal human behavior. Or he thought it was funny. Snape could never tell.

"Professor Potter said you thought the issue might be alchemical."

"Or at least far enough out of the box that it would help to have the insight of someone who doesn't think in Potions."

"One of these days I will get you to take up Alchemy," Flamel insisted as he began to unpack his laboratory.

"Only after I have mastered everything about potions," Snape replied. "I'm still not there yet."

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Hari boarded the plane for JFK after making a note on his list. The airport here in Hong Kong was amusingly familiar. Despite the refreshingly civilized food, there were plenty of English around. His trip through the greater Eurasian landmass had been productive. He hadn't even had to take very much, so there weren't many headlines related to his activities-although one French museum had been very upset when that wing had collapsed.

He spent the flight sitting in first class and enjoying peace and quiet as he mixed things in small bowls and doodled on a piece of parchment, working on a particular configuration. The nice stewardess brought him a glass of tea and otherwise stayed out of his way.

X

X

There were several months' worth of reports waiting for him in his office and he took a weekend to work on his compilations. It was amazing what you could learn with enough people in the right places. He'd want to consult with Uncle Sasori as to whether there was anything worth exploiting, but there were certainly things he *could* make use of. People were so uptight about certain behaviors.

And the Triwizard Tournament was happening this year. He had no idea what that was offhand, but it sounded interesting. He would need to find out more details, but he had neglected to get much of a foothold in the Games and Sports department. Besides, everyone was preparing for the Quidditch World Cup.

Hari looked up when an owl landed in his office. He hadn't had any contracts from the magical world and had not, in fact, expected to have any. Nevertheless, a job was a job. He opened the letter and read. When he finished reading, he had a broad grin on his face.

Hari was paging through reports. Gringotts had sent their third request for more personnel since the contract started and he was penning them an only mildly rude reply explaining that while there were other options theoretically available, those options lacked the finesse that Gringotts had specified in the hiring request and that until such options presented themselves-at which time he would let them know, since they had right of first refusal-to please, with respect, fuck off so he could get back to work.

Things had gone well in the job in Mongolia, though he wasn't sure how there had been so many dead in a single camp on the steppes, but he wasn't being paid to ask questions like that. Or even to prevent deaths. So it worked out.

He nearly stabbed the owl that landed on his desk before realizing that it wasn't one of the Gringotts flock. In fact, it was Pansy's owl and it looked decidedly unhappy about the kunai a millimeter from its eyeball. He took the letter from it and watched the bird wing away with a degree of alacrity that could be considered impolite. He was going to mention how rude her owl was the next time he saw Pansy.

Dear Professor Pronglet,

It is with great gravitas that I write to inform you of an important coming-of-age ceremony among Marauders. As your godfather, it is my sworn duty (especially since your mother isn't around to kill me for it) to ensure that you are fully prepared for the best four years

Hogwarts has to offer. To that end, you are invited and required to come on a trip with myself and Professor Werewolf to travel some of the world's houses of good repute in order that you might perfect certain skills required to get the best out of life. We have a week of debauched lessons to cram into a few days, so Time Turners will be employed.

If you wish to learn from the best, present yourself at the Parkinson residence today at noon.

Your dutiful horndogfather,

Sirius Orion "Yes, Please More" Black

P.S. Stamina Potions will be provided

Hari reread the letter and then filtered it through his Uncle-Sasori-lexicon and his Uncle-Hidan-intention-filter and grinned broadly once more.

X

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"Glad to see you arrived, pup!" Sirius was waiting outside the Parkinson estate with a somewhat confused Moony. The werewolf knew what was about to happen, but he wasn't sure why he was coming along. When Sirius and James had done this before their Fourth Year, they had dragged him and Peter along because they were friends. Besides, they needed him to plan out how to not get caught by their parents. To this day, he believed that James's parents were aware of what had happened and had decided to allow it. Or they were insane. Whichever.

"Well, I already spent a week mastering quite a few skills, but I would be remiss to not learn more." Hari was dressed as he usually was- unlike Sirius, who was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, massive sunglasses, and cutoff jeans, or Lupin, who was wearing a pair of

shorts and a T-Shirt that said 'I Bite'. "And I did not have any exposure to magical techniques, so that would be a nice addition to my arsenal."

"Well, it'll be added to someone's arse." Sirius chuckled and wondered if his godson had worked out what was going on, since the boy seemed smirking in a way that Sirius had been known to use for panty-dropping. "If you think you've got the basics down, then we'll head right in."

"Sirius..." Lupin said as he watched his friend dig around in a satchel that clinked with potions bottles. "Why am I coming along."

"Because you don't get to come along much. You're too self-sacrificing. Besides, you're on Wolfsbane and the full moon is three weeks away. This is the strongest you'll feel. Think of it this way: where we're going, they're paid to not care about things like being a werewolf unless you bite them... and turn them into a werewolf. Which can't happen. We'll be back long before then."

"But Sirius..."

"Moony, I'm rich. And I've lost twelve years of my life to Azkaban. I intend to spend a lot of money. I have twelve year's worth that I can't spend on me, so it's spare and I'll spend it on you! Now stop complaining, you idiot wolf and lets spend time with... cats."

X

X

==OUTtakE==

"Headmaster?" Snape asked quietly, sitting beside the old man who suddenly looked his age. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was ashen as best as could be seen with the giant beard. "What in the fuck put you here?" It was just as well that it was Christmas break; pretty much only a handful of students had elected to remain

behind with the threat of Sirius Black on the loose. Oddly, several of his snakes had stayed, and Potter (why was Potter in the Slytherin dorms, anyway? He'd tried to have the boy removed and nothing seemed to work.)

"We... may have a problem, Severus." Albus said carefully.

"A 'problem'? I gather you can't just have this one killed or arrested, then? Or just abused into compliance?"

"Not really, no. Someone seems to have taken the Stone."

"Oh." Snape considered this for a moment. "How?"

"If I knew that, I doubt I'd be here, boy!" Dumbledore's burst of rage had Snape in mind of his mercifully-dead father. "I'd be out hunting it down. But no one should have been able to get in!"

"Perhaps your summoned mercenary did it?" Dumbledore froze. Snape went on, "on the upside: if we don't pay him, maybe he'll leave and we'll have fewer problems around here?"

"And lose Potter?" Dumbledore snarled. "Black will kill him too soon!"

"What do you suggest, Headmaster?"

"I need a few more hours of sleep. Then we'll see about concocting a law that will allow us access to the funds of former Death Eaters. That should do the job."

(A/N John)

So, we're late on this one.

(A/N 2 John)

Somehow we're not back at Hogwarts yet. We'll manage that eventually. But not next chapter. There's still some things to be

done!

(A/N 3 John)

Also, we see the return of "Professor Wayne". I really shouldn't have stopped doing that, but I did and I decided to go back to it. Because.

(A/N 4 John)

The good news is I have another chapter or so ready, so hopefully we'll get something out before it gets to this kind of length of time again.

Training?

Chapter 72: Train... ing?

"Hello, Pansy." Pansy jumped when Hari's voice came from directly beside her. She whirled, about to shout at him, only to blush at the grin on his face. "Sorry we're late."

"Late?" Why was he grinning like that?

"Yeah. We were supposed to meet you at your home." Hari's face fell into an easy smile and like that, the blush began to fade. "But... a certain person had to settle up some extra debts we might have incurred. It was quite... fun, though."

"Debts?"

"There were people unable to work for a week. They needed to be compensated." Hari paused. "Not that they had been complaining."

"Not going to ask. Hello, Professor Lupin. You look very relaxed."

"Hm? Oh yes. I'm feeling very relaxed indeed. Sprinkles wanted to be here to see you off, but he's feeling quite, quite exhausted. We were both quite impressed by Professor Potter's... skills and ability to learn."

"Still not asking what you're talking about."

"Probably for the best. Your parents wouldn't approve. Probably." Lupin looked a bit unsure.

"Right, well, best to get on the train." Hari waved to Professor Werewolf and trotted to the cabin reserved for Prefects. It was gratifying to find that no one had tried to appropriate it. He waved to Tracy, who was looking very glad to be going away from the home

with two newborns in it. She was half-asleep on a couch and didn't respond to his greeting.

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Hari had settled in to do a bit of paperwork. Pansy was reading some muggle book that Sirius had recommended and snickering now and again in a way that suggested she was enjoying it. She also had a pair of headphones on and was bobbing her head to whatever song she was listening to. Daphne walked in scowling and dragging a masked-Astoria behind her. Hari didn't know why Girl-Tobi didn't just escape, but perhaps she was having fun? Tam hadn't said a word about Hari forgetting to visit, but she seemed pleased to have had a little more peace and quiet than expected. Blaise, on the other hand, was seething and only stark terror kept him from trying to shout at Hari. Then Millie turned up with bloody knuckles, a black eye and a broad grin.

"HARI!" Hermione stormed into the compartment with the *Daily Profit* and a clipbook of the *Times* clutched in her fists, her face a rictus of fury. She threw the magical paper at him, frowning when he caught it without looking up. "Well?"

"Well what?" He made a note in a ledger and turned a page.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Hello, Hermione; I hope you had a good summer?"

She paused. "Thank you. But I mean about the World Cup!"

"I don't follow football," was his immediate response. "Or do you mean the Quidditch cup? Did something happen?"

Hermione stood with her mouth agape for several long moments, during which the train began to move. "Yes!" she snapped finally. ""

Something ' happened!"

Hari looked up, his face set in an expression of great interest. "What was it?"

"There was a massacre," Daphne said, relenting and allowing Astoria to tear out of the room with a gleeful scream.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," she leaned back and massaged her forehead as shrieks bounced off the corridor walls outside. "Apparently some bloody geniuses got it into their heads to send a message about how the Dark is to be feared. Or something. They dressed up as Death Eaters and went out to terrorize the campsite in the wake of the Cup-Ireland won, by the way."

"Alright?" replied Hari, clearly not following.

"Hari... many British families were there. Families whose children are your students. And there were the recent graduates and the Auror trainees and... several others." Hermione sighed. "They slaughtered the entire group. No prisoners or anything."

"Well yeah. I did teach them that prisoners are only to be taken for a purpose."

" They nearly caused an international incident! " Hermione shouted.

"But they didn't."

"Well, no," Hermione seemed unhappy to admit it. "Apparently going around dressed as a terrorist organization is something frowned upon, especially when trying to terrorize people. Once it became clear that all the dead were foreigners who had gotten the bright idea to attack your students... well, the Ministry called it suicide and suggested that any foreign government that had a problem with that should stand up and say that attacking civilians at a major sporting

event was acceptable. There was a remarkable lack of complaint afterwards."

"You don't say."

"But your students turned part of the campground into charnel pit! It was only the work of a dozen skilled forensics specialists that let them even identify the remains!"

"There were no local wizards killed?" Hari asked.

"Not a one," Pansy had taken off her headphones and seemed to be taking great joy in Hermione's displeasure. "I get the impression that none of the locals wanted a thing to do with it." She paused. "I heard my parents talking. It sounded like the Malfoys got wind of something going down and decided they had celebrated enough-went home early for a good night's sleep. Same with the Crabbes, Goyles, Yaxleys. Every local wizard who heard what the foreigners planned made a point of being at home in their own beds before the moon was high."

"So a bunch of people trying to cause trouble died bloody deaths. What's the problem here?"

Hermione glared at her friends, most of whom were nodding their heads. "It's just that they nearly got us into a war! Stop looking pleased at the prospect!"

"That explains the *Prophet*," Tracy murmured, her eyes opening for a moment and then closing. "What about the scrapbook? I can see clippings from the *Times* poking out."

"It has been an interesting summer," Hermione explained, sitting down and opening the book. "A strange series of break-ins. Museums all over the world. Archeology departments finding samples going missing. The British Museum lost a few things from the vault. Someone stole the oldest copy of the Magna Carta. Only a

small fraction of the missing things even have any intrinsic worth outside of the scientific community."

"And?" Daphne prompted.

"And there was no evidence of who did it or why. Except for a white glove in the British Museum."

"Still not seeing your point."

"Do you know anyone else who could do that?"

"She has a point, Hari."

"Hm?" Hari looked up from his ledger. "Oh, sorry. What were we talking about?"

"Your little robbery-spree over the summer. I bet they didn't even find most of the places you broke in, did they?" Hermione brandished an atlas with handwritten notes scrawled over the maps. "They didn't find the one in Cairo, did they? Or the one in Madrid. Or more than a dozen others? All museums with serious archeology departments." Some of the notes had dates. "You wanted something."

"I didn't know you were into conspiracy theories, Hermione," Hari replied mildly.

Hermione threw her hands up in the air and scowled.

"Well think of it this way, Hermione," Tracy murmured. "If he was busy robbing museums, that means that he probably wasn't responsible for the... event in Mongolia."

"Thank goodness for small favors, then. But even so..."

"What on earth would I want in a museum?" Hari asked, making a few notes in his ledger.

"Apparently you wanted samples of bones."

"Odd. I'm not really into scrimshaw, you know. Though now that you mention it, bone does make a good base for certain kinds of poison and curse enchantments. Old ones are usually stronger-greater connection with death and the afterlife and all."

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "Please tell me you're not planning to mass-produce some kind of death magic!"

"I'm not planning to mass-produce death magic." Hari sniffed. "You have no faith in me."

"On the contrary," Pansy muttered, "we have a great deal of faith in you... that you will find new and terrifying uses for magic that unleash death and chaos on the world."

Hari opened his mouth and then closed it again. "Fair enough."

X

X

The train moved along at a steady pace and Tracy had finally dragged herself out of her stupor to contribute more than a sentence or two. She was *definitely* thrilled to be away from her new brothers. They were cute when she put silencing charms on them and her mother had declared that anyone who tried to raise children without magic to clean up was either a saint or just plain crazy; Tracy agreed with that assessment. Most of the time, Tracy just stayed out of the way and found something to do, but with a pair of babies, her mother had ordered her to help on the grounds that she could use magic. It meant that her father sometimes could get a bit of sleep. She was *almost* used to her mother nursing in the living room, but it still felt a bit... weird.

Daphne was in a discussion with Hermione about their upcoming classes. Third Year was almost exclusively devoted to foundational knowledge; it was all about the absolute basics necessary for a discipline-the ones that could be used pretty much no matter what

path of study was eventually taken. Fifth Year was always prep for exams. Anything during the N.E.W.T. years was strictly self-directed as far as their classes were concerned. The Fourth Year was the one that was most variable. It depended on the professor. Some of the students going into their Fifth Year had shared their experiences, but the curriculum was changed regularly.

Pansy was still reading her book, leaning on Millie's shoulder as the large girl changed the bandages wrapped around her hands and cleaned her various blunt instruments. There were an awful lot of them and they all needed a thorough going over to get the blood off.

Blaise seethed and Tam was writing in a diary.

"Hello, Malfoy," Hari said as the door slid open.

"Pot-er, hello."

"What do you want?" hissed Pansy.

"Well, I wanted to ask Professor Potter if he knew about the Triwizard Tournament happening this year."

"Yep."

"Oh."

"Why did you want to ask that?" Pansy asked, eyes narrowed.

"My father decided that after the World Cup incident, it would be best if Professor Potter were aware of how we could be helpful members of society. Funny that."

"I don't have any of the details, though." Hari said.

"Excellent!" Draco grinned. "My father made me memorize everything he knew. He asked that you please let everyone in your classes know that he's capable of being a non-dangerous member of society at least once a month."

"I don't have classes to teach this year."

"Riiiiiiight." Malfoy rolled his eyes and sat down on a spare couch that put Millie between himself and Hermione. "I'll start at the beginning?"

"What *is* the Triwizard Tournament?" asked Daphne.

"Officially? It's a way for the three premiere schools of magic to get together and strengthen international ties."

"I take it, then, that there is an *unofficial* purpose?" Hermione said.

"Several, depending whom you ask. One theory says it's basically a pissing contest-you know, like a way of showing which school has the biggest magical penis. Another one says that it's advertising to get students to attend the school-that one makes less sense, though; people often attend either the nearest school or one with which they have familial history. The last one I know of says that it's a substitute for war. A way for the major magical powers in Europe to compete without the mess of full-scale battle."

"My father figures that the last one is a bit far-fetched. Especially since there've been plenty of wars since the Tournament. I don't know if he's right or wrong, but it makes sense. I'm sure if we asked Granger, she could cite all of the major conflicts-I'm not asking you to! And he's the one who pointed out that most students end up at the same schools their parents go to. My mother likes to joke that I almost ended up at Durmstrang, but she didn't like the uniforms-but the fact is that pretty much everyone from the Black family went to Hogwarts since they got to England with William the Conquerer."

"At the risk of interrupting your explanation," Hermione said, "what about the Malfoy family?"

"Got to England way later. We didn't come in with a conquering king, so I can't remember the exact year, but it was some time around Henry VI, I think. We're thoroughly English since then, though."

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==Omake==

Uchiha Sasuke was running madly towards the border of Lightning Country. More importantly, he was headed for the mountains there because there was an exceptionally angry bounty hunter trying to severely maim him. Thanks to his Sharingan, he'd been able to dodge the various blasts flung at him, but this was out of his league, so he was following Orochimaru's teaching that fleeing a fight he couldn't win was the better part of living to fight another day. Kakuzu was tenacious and had a century of combat experience and, given that Sasuke's Sharingan was just barely giving him an edge, probably sparred with his older brother.

It was just as well he'd managed to lose Karin right after killing the target. She would be well out of the line of fire. And lightning. And water. S-rank ninja were really dangerous people. While Sasuke would be personally fine with Karin getting turned into a roasted stalker, the fact was that Orochimaru considered her a valuable asset and would be put out if Sasuke got her killed. Trying to protect that useless fangirl wasn't something to be done while avoiding someone who was probably the most experienced shinobi alive.

Sasuke jumped, spun, flung a handful of senbon charged with lightning in the general direction of his pursuer, landed and took off directly to his left at a dead run. Kabuto was right about one thing: there was nothing quite like fleeing from an enemy of Kakuzu's talent to force one's skills sharper than ever. That was why he was being sent after bounties that were likely to attract the elder ninja's attention. It had become a familiar dance he did with the former Waterfall elite: get to bounty first, kill bounty, flee enraged S-rank ninja, repeat.

Karin was always useful in tracking the target, but the tradeoff was having the clingy girl around him and that was more a punishment

than anything. It almost would have been worth it for Orochimaru's attempts to breed the two of them taking if it meant she'd be kept back in Sound for the duration of the pregnancy. Almost. But then he'd have another Uchiha with unstable parents and he was unstable enough on his own. His clan needed nice, stable influences. Or Naruto.

Still, it had been possibly the worst way he could be introduced to the world of 'love' or at least sex. Karin had been too nervous to be of any help no matter how eager and willing and he hadn't been particularly attracted to her and, in fact, wasn't quite sure what he was attracted to, since he spent much of his time in Sound, where the women were too crazy for him. All that fumbling and tears and apologizing (her, not him. He wasn't going to apologize for something he was being ordered to do and was faintly disgusted by) and it had been an uncoordinated mess, made worse by Orochimaru trying to give instruction. The man was so clinical about it. And having the creepy snake sage observing wasn't the kind of thing to help gain or keep an erection.

Sasuke dodged into a cave network and then out through a hidden exit, doubling back on the man chasing him. Thankfully, Orochimaru had pretty much given up on Karin as breeding stock and Sasuke had managed to put off any further attempts. It was only a matter of time before he was strong enough to put down the man and then he could get on with his duty to clean up the stain of the Uchiha. Leaf might have some objections, but Naruto would smooth things out.

(A/N John)

So we come to the end of another chapter. Happily it has come out sooner than the last did. Hermione is a clever girl and she's begun to notice things about the news and Hari; it was only a matter of time before she put things together.

(A/N 2 John)

We also have the introduction of Draco Malfoy as a character rather than a punching bag. Last year he had mastered the important skill of not making trouble and so has begun moving into the realm of potentially useful. His relevance was unexpected and has grown on me a bit. He's not a voice of reason, of course, but he's no longer an arrogant brat either. I like to think that he's matured a little.

(A/N 3 John)

There are probably a large number of institutions whose employees are technically criminals, but since no one is complaining, it's unlikely to be a problem.

(A/N 4 John)

I've promised it before and I'll say it again: bodies will drop this year. Like. Fucking. Flies. More Bodies than Drowning Pool. Bodies for days. Pop-pop watch them bodies drop. And so on.

An Expected Yet Unexpected Arrival

Chapter 73: An Expected Yet Unexpected Arrival

... Or When Things Get Interesting Early

"The Triwizard Tournament sounds incredibly dangerous," Hermione said when Malfoy had finished explaining.

"It is, Granger. People regularly die and they stopped having it after the fifth time in a row without a champion because everyone was dead."

"And they're restarting it?" Daphne asked, sounding incredulous.

"They are. I hear they're limiting entry to those already of majority, so I'm going to bet on Professor Potter winning."

"He's not reached majority, though," Hermione felt compelled to point out.

"And you think that will stop him?" Millie replied.

"Winning it sounds like fun," Hari added.

"Pleasure talking with you," Malfoy said, rising. "I quite liked not being hit in the head with books for a change. Good day." He nodded politely and left the compartment.

"Does anyone else wonder that he didn't comment on us being in the Prefect's cabin?" Blaise murmured.

"Nah."

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"Were we ever that scrawny?" Daphne pointed at the line of tiny First Years who were toddling into the Great Hall to line up and await sorting.

"Depends," said Pansy. "Do you mean in general? Or that one who's soaked to the bone and grinning like an idiot?"

"Both."

"I don't know if the chubby one on the end counts as scrawny, for one thing, Daphne. But setting that aside, I guess we must have. I mean, I don't remember being so small, but how could we not have been? On the other hand, the one who's waving to someone at the Gryffindor table is absolutely *tiny* ."

"And none of us were quite that undignified. He's dripping on the floor."

"So's the Head Girl," commented Hari without looking up from a book he was reading.

"But she's not wet..." Hermione objected.

"As far as *you* can see." The group ignored Hermione's scandalized gasp. "What makes it interesting is that the two boys don't know about each other." *That* got their attention.

"The Head Girl is sleeping with two people?" Pansy demanded.

"Sleeping was definitely not involved, but yes."

"Who?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes!" Daphne and Pansy hissed.

"We could blackmail her!" Daphne explained.

"What for?" Hari asked. "I mean, really. What do we need?"

"The future is unforeseen and therefore having useful information is of undetermined value," said Daphne. It was natural for a Slytherin, even one who was in close proximity to Hari for extended periods to want information. It was lightweight and as powerful as a spell when used in the right way.

"A Hufflepuff Sixth Year and a Ravenclaw Seventh Year," Hari said. "Hufflepuff one is Drew Faintree, the one with the brown hair that always sticks up. Ravenclaw is Alan Rupe, green eyes and blond hair with the silver earring in his left ear."

"I can't say I approve of her choices," muttered Pansy.

"Agreed. I don't think Rupe washes. His hair is greasy."

"Faintree's a beater though. He's probably got some nice muscles."

"There is that."

"Are we having 'girl-talk' at the dinner table?" grumbled Blaise. "I came to school to get away from that."

"If it helps any, I'm not interested in the discussion either," offered Hermione. "Though I don't know why we're discussing someone else's sex life at all."

"Information is power," replied Daphne and Pansy.

"Really, Hermione," Daphne went on, "you read books constantly and constantly try to learn more. Why haven't you realized yet that it's not only academics where that drive should be put to use. You're a Slytherin! We are cunning and ambitious." She looked at Hari. "And Hari. But he doesn't count. Anyway, the point is that you sometimes need to... grease the wheels a bit in service of ambition and one should go about that via cunning. Or Hari."

Hermione shook her head. "I'll get where I'm going on my merits alone."

"One could argue that being a good blackmailer is a merit," Hari commented.

"No it isn't!"

Dumbledore stood. His beard stuck out as though he had shoved a finger in a light socket and smoldered gently. His glasses had been replaced with dark sunglasses. On his head was a pointed, purple hat made of velvet with a leopard print design around the edge and a feather almost as tall as him sticking out of it. His robes were purple velvet with leopard print lapels and he had a cane with a disco-ball made of glass on the top. His wand launched a fireball into the air which exploded, raining down a layer of flaky, white ash onto everyone.

"Thank you for your attention. We will begin the sorting now. Please show the proper reverence for this momentous event by shutting your pie-holes. Also, Ms. Wax will please *shut* her mouth, not stuff it." There were a few moments of silence before a redheaded girl with rumpled robes slipped out from under the Gryffindor table and took a seat, her face a blazing scarlet. "Thank you for joining us."

Dumbledore seemed to consider something for a moment, his hand forestalling Professor McGonagall, who had drawn her wand and was advancing on her House table with a look of murderous incredulity. "Though I appreciate your devotion to preventing pregnancy, you may want to ask Mister Urthart why he was able to perform while looking at an old man." He twinkled at the Hall with a beatific smile.

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The sorting took remarkably little time. Either the new students were all demonstrating strong house leanings or the Hat was getting

better. Or bored. Both were plausible. The distribution of students wasn't quite even, but Hufflepuff was only slightly better represented than the others, by a duo of students whose entrance had been welcomed with the usual badger-y cries of approval. To the shock of no one sitting near Hari, the boy who looked like he was ecstatic to have been soaked to the bone ended up in the House of the Cannon-Fodder where someone who bore a passing resemblance to him offered a hearty greeting.

The few new Slytherins sat quietly, unsure of how to proceed. No one really talked about House Politics at home these days, so it wasn't entirely clear with whom they should begin cultivating alliances. Daphne Greengrass sat at the center of the table, surrounded first by others in her year (and one Third Year) and then a ring of empty space before the rest of the house. It certainly *looked* like she was holding court. But she didn't have the air of a queen to her. Never mind that she was a Fourth Year, she didn't expect others to let her speak or to agree with her—that much was clear from the quiet argument about blackmail that had resumed the moment the last student had been seated. It was all very confusing to them and they resolved, each on his or her own, to sit and wait. Slytherin was not the House of Jumping-To-Conclusions. At least, not in theory.

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"Now then," Dumbledore said when the new students were seated.
"We have our usual, start-of-year announcements to deal with.

"Firstly: despite requests from the Ministry, there *will* be Quidditch this year. I simply could not condone the cancelation of one of our most popular sporting events simply because the pitch will be needed shortly before the finals. It's not as though we couldn't just have them sooner. And I refuse to accept that it would 'detract from the interest in the primary event this year you old fart'. So those of you still enamored with flying around in dangerous ways and trying to kill yourselves and others in the process, you will have your

opportunities. I am sure that the heads of houses will want to have their tryouts at some point and will kindly arrange the scheduling of such matters on their own time.

"Secondly: we will be having the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts this year. You will be forgiven for not knowing what that is; it has been a few years since the last one. To give you an idea of what that means-I wasn't born yet. The event is a competition between the three most important magical schools in Europe. Complaints that there are other important schools have yet to convince us that they count as equally important.

"The event is a series of competitions between the school Champions, one from each school. The challenges will be dangerous and potentially lethal. We expect that only some of the contestants will survive. I, for one, am willing to risk that someone else will die on their quest for glory. I won't tell you what the tasks are, because they are supposed to be secret I'm talking to Mister Malfoy here by the way.

"As a direct result of the Tournament, we will be hosting the upper classes from both Bouxbatons and Durmstrang for much of the year, starting with October 30th. I won't tell you to be on your best behavior because I have no doubt you wouldn't bother. Messrs Weasley, for example, will no doubt try to prank as many people as possible. I ask only that you keep in mind that being implicated in an international incident is not only not a laughing matter, but one that could result in actual punishment from authorities other than your school.

"While most other announcements could wait until you have been fed and watered, as I suspect your young bodies demand in all their hormonal chaos, I wanted to address a matter of staffing. Professor Werewo- *Lupin* resigned at the end of our previous year citing the need to not teach such violent maniacs. Since we were left without a Defense Professor I was expecting to need Professor Potter's assistance once again..." Dumbledore allowed a moment of cheering before waving for silence. "But in light of the Tournament

taking place, I was politely 'asked' to allow a specialist to oversee things related to security. Far be it from me to second guess a moron like our Minister when he insists I get outside aid. Currently missing from the Head Table is the new Professor in question-

The doors banged open

In walked a man upon whom the term "grizzled" seemed insufficient. His hair, while clean and white, grew haphazardly across a scalp so crossed with scar-tissue that it resembled the battlefields of the Great War. What little hair there was had been not so much cropped as buzzed until only a scant inch extended out of his head. He had probably had a nose once, but it had been mashed, broken, hacked, gouged, and slashed until it was a shadow of its former self. His lips were drawn into a sneer on one side, more scars pulling his cheek up and away, while on the other side his mouth had been cut away in a ghastly parody of a smile, baring his teeth in the manner of a skull.

One eye was brown and had a feverish light to it, burning with the kind of energy that allowed a man to keep moving after his body had been ravaged by violence beyond repair. The other was the blue of the sky, completely and with only a single dot in the center. It swiveled about wildly and independent of the other, sometimes vanishing as it rolled all the way back.

His left hand, the only one extended from his robes, was gnarled and battered. It was missing the ring finger entirely and the last joint of the pinky. Carved into the back of the hand was a rune for protection that somehow managed to be seen despite the overlapping scars. Clutched in his remaining fingers was a cane. It was a long, sturdy length of wood, stained with splashes of dark color that resembled dried humors. The head of it was a lump of some unknown metal around which the wood had grown.

"-has decided to make a dramatic entrance." Dumbledore's tone was decidedly unamused. "Alastor Moody, retired Auror and well-known violent maniac, has graciously volunteered to come out of retirement and teach my students how to become paranoid sociopaths." He

seemed to consider that statement. "Actually, that may not be anything new. Regardless, it's so nice of you to join us for dinner."

The hall was silent except for the step-thump, step-thump of the new Professor's halting gait. The swish of his robes revealed a wooden stump that he had to drag along each time he stepped forwards.

"That's interesting," said Hari.

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Professor Snape tried to eat without looking at *Professor Moody*. The man had already accused him three times of being a traitor and a murderer. While both were technically true (alright, more than technically) it still wasn't nice to have those terms thrown at you by a man whose hands were soaked in blood. Besides, the only thing he'd been guilty of recently was tolerating the antics of one of his students whom he couldn't control if he tried. It was tiring, really, to hear the same accusations from the man that he'd spouted every time they encountered one another. An unfortunate side-effect of the man being Dumbledore's friend was that he came around now and again and never failed to attempt a burglary of Snape's quarters in order to investigate. And then to make further accusations upon discovering that Snape had prevented that intrusion.

It was because of his studious avoidance of the man sitting next to him (it was also a singularly terrifying and disgusting experience to see the man chew) that he saw Pansy Parkinson stand up from the Slytherin table and meet his eyes. She walked towards him, a determined look on her face. He wondered if there was going to be a way to get her to stop wearing those slit-thighed skirts, because he really didn't want some idiot to forget himself and get shot for staring.

"Miss Parkinson," he said as she reached the Head Table, standing on the opposite side and gazing steadily at him.

Then she launched herself up, using her left hand to support her weight and swung her body over the table, her knees slamming into Moody's chest, knocking him backwards to the floor with a clatter of wood, and her right hand smoothly drawing her gun and shoving it into the man's mouth.

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=OMAKE=

Tsunade looked at the reports from Jiraiya. They were well written, concise, and detailed; the man had made intelligence work an art form. She still had trouble believing that her idiot fuckup of a teammate who had never failed to be the one who caused whatever calamity they were escaping, who had spent more time asking her out and flirting with any pretty girl he saw, who had once decided to copy her teacher's technique without a summoning contract and ended up becoming the student of a bunch of sentient toads... he was also the spymaster of the largest village in the Elemental Nations and had, with few exceptions, proved to be better at his job than his opponents were at theirs.

Presently, she was reading an account of a battle that had taken place on the border of Lightning between a ninja who was not technically a missing-nin and a man who was over a century old and had fought her grandfather (well, been trounced by him accidentally, but that counted as fighting Grandpa-Hashirama most of the time). Since as far as she could tell, no one but the combatants had been present, she was at a loss for how he had a nearly blow-by-blow record. He also reported that the Akatsuki were getting ready to move soon and so he and Naruto would be returning to the village.

Why was he coming back to the village if their enemies were likely to be on the move? This seemed like the ideal time to hide away their target, but since Jiraiya was the spymaster, she assumed he had a reason and that he would explain when they got back. He *would*

explain. She liked Naruto, despite him being a colossal pain in her ass thanks to his antics with the council.

Speaking of Naruto... "Dragon!" An ANBU appeared in front of her. "How goes the search for infiltrators?"

"We've caught sixteen enemy agents in the last month and a half, Lady Tsunade. They were promptly turned over to T&I for debriefing and example-fication."

"Damn the foreign ninja!" Tsunade growled. "I want to catch Naruto's clones!"

Dragon didn't move, but behind his mask, his eyes flitted back and forth in panic. As far as his ANBU could tell, there were *no clones*, but the boss was insistent and one didn't argue with the boss. "Yes, my Lady!" Dragon saluted and fled before she could interrogate him further on the matter.

"Infiltrate my village..." Tsunade shook her head. "Damn Uchiha!" Maybe Great-Uncle-Tobirama was right...

(A/N John)

Bodies will have to wait a little longer

(A/N 2 John)

And yes, last time was a reference to *Hellsing: Abridged*

Forearmed is Forewarned

Chapter 74: Forearmed is Forewarned. Right?

The High Table and, indeed, the Great Hall were a tableau of contrasting attitudes. The Seventh Years had grabbed the firsties and shoved them under the tables while casting protection spells. The rest of the student body had all begun throwing personal shields up over themselves. At the High Table, the teachers' responses were a study in personalities. Most of the staff were agog, despite years of experience with Professor Potter's monsters; Minerva McGonagall had her hand on her wand; Flitwick, a champion duelist and veteran of the recent conflict, had his wand out and pointed at Pansy Parkinson; Severus Snape, a specialist in dark arts, violent combat, and Hari Potter had his wand in his hand and was deciding whom to point it at; Albus Percival Wulfric Dora-the-Explora Brian J. Dumbledore had his wand pointed at Mad-Eye Moody.

Snape was the first one to move. He had observed Dumbledore's response and decided that the man probably had a better grasp of the situation than he did; he therefore pointed his wand at Moody. "Headmaster, while I'm not going to doubt your judgement, may I ask why we're aiming our wands at the *victim* of an unprovoked assault?"

"While there are several reasons," Dumbledore's voice possessed an unusually hard edge to it, "the one that springs most readily to mind is that the *real* Alastor Moody wouldn't have been caught by that attack."

"Real..." Flitwick felt that he was coming late to this party. "Didn't Miss Parkinson attack Moody?"

"No," Pansy snapped. "I attacked someone pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody."

"Well, I commend you for your impressive way of preventing him from resisting," Dumbledore commented, suddenly mild as milk. "Severus, would you be so kind as to fetch your Veritaserum? I do believe that there are questions that need answering."

Snape eyed his student, who looked disturbingly comfortable with her firearm shoved into a man's mouth, ignoring the blood bubbling up from where she'd knocked out his front teeth. "Miss Parkinson, please refrain from taking a human life unless you really have no other choice."

"As long as he doesn't move, I won't be getting a lesson in the appearance of human brains," she replied, glaring at the man under her knees. "If he breathes too loudly though... well, I might flinch."

A flash of red light struck the faux Professor. "As much as I appreciate your solution, Miss Parkinson, I do believe that he might choose death over being questioned and I don't intend to give him that option." Dumbledore motioned for her to rise. "Do return to your table. I think we shall finish our meal and then sort out this man. Professor Potter, would you see to it that this man remains alive, capable of answering questions when I need them answered, and in my office until later?"

Pansy glared as she walked passed Hari, feeling that this was going to be trouble and it would somehow be his fault. Hari calmly picked up the unconscious man and struck him once in the back. "There. His limbs are paralyzed. I'll make sure he doesn't bite off his tongue while we wait." He tossed the man over his shoulder and walked out of the Hall.

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Pansy was listening to her friends. Most of the conversation was a riff on the theme of 'was that *really* necessary?' and she was getting tired of it. They probably would react badly if she pointed her gun at

them, though, so she just focused on eating her food and trying to silently project to their minds that she was entirely certain that she'd done the right thing, thank you very much.

"Miss Parkinson." Pansy whirled and just barely avoided firing on the Headmaster, who just observed the gun pointed at him with polite interest. "Before I go have a word with Professor Potter's prisoner, I was just wondering if you would enlighten me."

"Yes, I thought it was absolutely necessary, Headmaster."

"I'm glad you think so. I would hope that such actions would only be undertaken when you are sure. That is not, however, why I am here."

"I don't think he was technically a Professor, so Pansy shouldn't be in trouble for assaulting a member of the faculty," Hermione pointed out. "I mean, if he's an impostor, he isn't *really* on staff, right?"

"A fair point as well. Also not my purpose."

"Alright," Pansy said slowly. "Why are you here?"

"I just was wondering what gave you the impression-right as it was-that the man you attacked was not Alastor Moody?"

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The scarred man had just begun to limp through the room when Hari spoke: "That's interesting."

Pansy's eyes narrowed. "No! No. No. No. No. No. We are not having this before Halloween. We haven't even had classes yet. Hell, the Feast hasn't even been served!" Hari cocked his head at her.

"Whatever it is that you find interesting will undoubtedly be something dangerous to the rest of us before long. Probably this evening, if your previous track record is to be believed."

"I'm sorry?"

"You said 'that's interesting'. That always precedes some sort of chaos. Trolls and Basilisks come to mind!"

"Well, there aren't any of those around right now."

"That's nice." Their friends were watching the exchange with interest.
"What did you find so interesting?"

"Nothing special. Professor Moody has Polyjuice Potion in his hip flask."

Pansy looked at the man working towards the Head Table. "That is interesting."

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"It was just a feeling, Headmaster."

"I see. Well, please consider allowing a member of the staff to handle the issue next time," Dumbledore twinkled at her. "If it's immediately life-threatening, I'm sure you could impose on Professor Potter. He *is* listed on the staff register this year as a guest lecturer."

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"Ah, Professor Potter." The Headmaster walked into his office, flanked by Snape and McGonagall. "You're not sitting in my chair. This is a pleasant surprise."

Hari shrugged. "I conjured my own." At his feet was an insensate man with hair like straw and skin that had the unhealthy pallor of someone who never saw the sun. His leg was a mangled ruin where

it had tried to reform while the false one was in place. "I reversed the shock, but he passed out from the pain anyway."

"That's fine. We can wake him up. I do, however, recognize him." Dumbledore sat in his chair and frowned. "This is the second dead man to show up in my school in as many years." He looked at Snape and McGonagall. "I haven't become senile and simply forgotten restoring Necromancy as an elective, yes?"

"No, Headmaster." McGonagall looked quietly horrified.

"Good. And bad. Why does my castle seem to be generating living corpses." Dumbledore smiled humorlessly. "On the upside, the Ministry can't possibly object to the use of Veritaserum; it's not illegal to pour it down a corpse's throat."

"When I heard Crouch Junior had died, I breathed a little easier," Snape admitted as he forced open the jaws of a man who was gritting his teeth in agony. "He wasn't exactly stable *before* he was convicted and sentenced by his father. Not, perhaps, as directly dangerous as Bellatrix, but still quite deranged." He gave up and poured the three drops through the gaps Pansy's gun had left.

"Headmaster, I know it would be wrong of me to enjoy a man's pain, but he cost one of my lions his parents in a cruel way. That said, we may want to dull the pain so he answers questions."

Hari sighed and reached down, pinching a spot on the man's shoulder. The grimace instantly turned slack.

"Barty Crouch Junior..." Dumbledore had a dark look on his face. "Let me start with the question that is most immediately pressing: where is the real Alastor Moody?"

"Trunk. Seventh Lock. Defense Office."

"Good. Professor Potter, please be so kind as to retrieve the man and deliver him to our resident healer. To save you the trouble of

breaking in and stealing my notes, I'll send you a copy when we've finished the questioning."

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The Common Room looked up when Hari walked in. He walked to the comfortable chairs by the fire and sat on the floor.

"Well?" Pansy prompted.

"The Headmaster will be providing me with a copy of his notes on the interview."

"Why?"

"He seemed to think I would break into his office to read them if he didn't. I'm offended that he thinks I need to break in."

"You would be." Daphne sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Is there anything you can tell us before we go to bed?"

"Not much. It was someone named Barty Crouch."

His friends stared. "Former Director of Magical Law Enforcement Barty Crouch?" Daphne gasped. "What could he possibly want here? The man's disgraced after his son turned out to be a Death Eater. A really nasty one at that. Good thing he's dead."

"Yeah. About that..." Hari grinned. "It looks like they missed a spot."

"Wait." Tracy's exhaustion from life with newborns had evaporated with her interest in the current topic. "Are you saying that Barty Crouch *Junior* was the one pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody?"

"Yep." Hari pulled out a ball of granite the size of his fist and a loop. A beam of light shot from his finger and he began to carve runes on the lump of stone.

"He died in Azkaban, didn't he?" Pansy frowned. "Oi, Draco! C'mere!"

Malfoy approached the group slowly, watching Hermione. "Yes?" He had no idea why he was apparently on first-name-terms with Pansy again, but not being her enemy sounded like a healthy lifestyle.

"Does your father keep tabs on the other Death Eaters?"

"Without admitting Death-Eaterhood for him, I will say that he has always been a concerned citizen and made a point of keeping track of those persons who have historically threatened our society. He is also close with many of the other persons whose actions during the war were ruled to have been as a result of Imperius usage."

"Let's pretend you just said 'yes', shall we?" Daphne muttered.

"Let's not. But within the scope of my previous statement, I would acknowledge that my father might well have information on a topic of a Death-Eatery nature."

"So, for example, if I asked if Barty Crouch Junior had died in Azkaban..."

"I would tell you that as far as I know, yes. Why?"

"Because he didn't." Hari's eyes stayed on his project.

"That is... odd." Malfoy looked distinctly unsettled. "Azkaban's up to three escapes now. Someone should do something about that; the residents are *not* nice people. I don't think you really want me to list the reasons they're in there."

"Probably for the same things your father was acquitted of?" Tracy suggested, a sneer on her face.

"Some," Draco shrugged. "But plenty of them are in there for being dangerous, sick creeps. It's where they put people who do the *really* nasty kinds of magic or commit the truly disgusting sorts of crimes."

Even the Death Eaters had *some* lines they didn't cross. Mostly." He shuddered.

"Loathe as I am to side with Dumbledore," Milile put in. "The Headmaster *does* seem to be taking the infiltration of our school seriously. I mean, if he willingly involved Hari, he *must* be."

"Never mind that! We've had all sorts of weird teachers. I mean have you *been* to Care of Magical Creatures? The oaf's idea of what is acceptable for Third Years... and we had Lockhart. Compared to him, Death Eaters might as well be choirboys! Even Quirrel attacked Aurors. I'm worried about Azkaban leaking prisoners! First thing tomorrow, I'm writing my father!"

"Running to daddy, Draco?" Pansy asked, snickering.

"About this? Absolutely! We're *fourteen*, Pansy; this is out of our league." He looked at Hari. "Mostly. My father is owed favors; if he asks questions about this, people will have to take care of it! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get some sleep."

X

X

Dumbledore smiled without looking up. "Lemon drop, Professor Potter?"

"No thank you, Headmaster."

"You read the report?"

"Yep." Hari leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on the Headmaster's desk. "I assume there's more to the story."

"In a way." Dumbledore looked up. "Last year, Voldemort managed to escape the cage I'd stuck him in while trying to sort out why he's not dead. As you saw in the report, he's now pulling the strings of some plot to use you in a reincarnation scheme. Unfortunately, our

new prisoner doesn't know anything useful about the specifics of that plan, so it will be hard to properly derail it. There are any number of methods he could be using and the kinds of magic involved are the sort I try to *avoid* studying. They're not good for the soul.

"But that leaves us in a rather interesting predicament. I really do *not* wish to show our hand, so if we can arrange for this to remain quiet, that would be for the best."

"I'll tell Malfoy that his father shouldn't mention Barty Crouch Junior."

"Mister Malfoy? I wasn't aware you were acquainted."

"He's sort of friends with Pansy. He was asked to confirm that the man in custody was thought dead. Malfoy was apparently disturbed to learn of a third escape from a prison filled with known felons."

"How does his father come into this?"

"He's going to write him, of course."

"I see. Could you pass along a request that he wait for the moment? As long as no one knows that we have caught on to the deception, we have options."

"You mean to have the real Moody pretend to be the impostor, then." Hari smiled to himself. "It's probably the only way to get further information."

"Indeed. Just pass along my request, no violence, please." Dumbledore scratched his chin. "It will be the long-con, Professor Potter. Without knowing more, we're going to have to play along until Voldemort reveals his hand."

"Moody will agree?"

Dumbledore chuckled to himself. "I'm certain of it."

X

X

==OmaKE==

Arnold Lewis sat back in his comfortable office chair. It wasn't the Boss's chair, of course, he wouldn't dream of sitting in Professor Potter's chair. But he had a nice chair of his own at his desk. Better still, he had a job that made great use of his skills. He'd always been more of a thinker than a doer and even Professor Potter hadn't changed that, but being employed by the Dawn gave him the opportunity to plan out the kinds of campaigns that Professor Potter had trained him for. It was satisfying to have an employer who appreciated your indifference to human life. The aurors had been wary of him, but now he had a fun job that always had something interesting happening. If there weren't contracts (and there were only a handful, because most people couldn't afford their rates), there was the endlessly enjoyable task of planning out any number of actions to be filed away in case of future need.

If he had to admit to a downside this job, it was learning to use a Muggle computer. Professor Potter had discovered their ability to process information and cross-reference it, after that, there hadn't been a chance of avoiding the blasted machines. So he had to use word-processing programs instead of quills, though it was nice not to get ink everywhere. It didn't lead to a paperless office, for all that he'd been told that by the Muggle who'd sold him the device; he had filing cabinets *full* of papers-magically expanded cabinets, no less!-and more of them filled with backup discs because he'd been warned that he should make sure *everything* was backed up. There were few things he envied about being a field operative for the Dawn, but not having to do more than fill out mission reports was one of them.

On the other hand, he got to dig through the truly massive room that they had hidden away. It was filled with maps and blueprints and diagrams that he was fairly certain any authority would consider it criminal to possess. He had a dozen copies of the plans for Buckingham Palace in a file, each with his notes on different plans

for infiltration and execution of a variety of tasks; two of them were designed for exclusively Muggle-style engagement. If he were a suspicious man (and he was) he might wonder if Professor Potter planned on bringing in *Muggles*. To be fair, his recent experiences with mission reports and the training required by Professor Potter meant that he had a decent respect for the ability of Muggles to do impressive things without magic, but still...

An owl flew into the office and dropped a scroll on his desk. This was the best part of his job by far. He knew Professor Potter got copies of all of this stuff and did his own work, but he got access to at least a good portion of the Dawn's intelligence network. He was the one who got to go through the reports (and Merlin, were there ever a lot of them) and figure out what they meant when put together. His inside knowledge of the Ministry alone was probably greater than most of its employees and that was only the tip of the iceberg. Arnold had pretty much moved into the office because there was so much to do, but it was too fun to miss.

(A/N John)

**Well, you have several more chapters before the bodies hit the floor, but take heart in knowing I've now written the scene.
There will be corpses everywhere.**

(A/N 2 John)

Well, not *everywhere*, but there will be a lot of them!

(A/N 3 John)

Yes, last chapter had references to Hellsing: Abridged in the author's notes

(A/N 4 John)

**The omake is just a look into the life of a Dawn employee.
Blame Spoon for the initial idea.**

Fanboi Time!

Chapter 75: Fanboi time!

"Good morning, Alastor!"

Moody growled at his friend. Albus Dumbledore had the ability to be relentlessly cheerful at ungodly hours such as noon-in-the-morning. "What in the fuck hit me?" he rasped. "I don't remember being in front of a lorry."

"I think, old friend, that you are feeling the effects of several weeks' confinement in your own trunk by a man thought to be dead."

"Come again?"

"Barty Crouch Junior ambushed you-how did you manage to let him pull that off, anyway?-stuffed you in your trunk, and proceeded to disguise himself as you with the intent of taking your place here at Hogwarts. Thankfully, one of my students decided to take matters into her hands and revealed the deception at the Welcoming Feast, so that was sorted out quickly enough. Of course, we had to keep you in a medical coma for a week so you could recover. Magic can only do so much, Alastor."

"I see. And yet, I don't think you've come for a social call."

"True." Dumbledore twinkled at Moody. "I want to run a con on Voldemort. You're going to pretend to be Barty Crouch Junior pretending to be you so we can find out what the plan is."

"I am?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Sounds... fun?" Moody paused. "It's been a week?"

"Yes. We would have been in so much trouble if Professor Potter hadn't volunteered to cover your classes."

"Professor Potter is *here*?" Moody demanded.

"Yes, he's about to start the Sixth Year NEWTs course a-" Dumbledore watched his friend bolt from the hospital bed, turning a sheet into robes and transfiguring the chair out from under him into a wooden leg. There was a clacking sound as Alastor moved far faster than anyone would expect him capable of, scuttling out of the ward and down the hall at a respectable pace. Absently, Dumbledore unbent his legs and looked around. "Something I said?"

"Albus!" he blanched as his resident medic came bustling towards him, eyes narrowed.

"Now, Poppy, before you say anything rash-

"Blow that! I wanted to give the man a proper physical now that he's able to answer questions. You *know* he doesn't go to any medical professional, so this was the perfect opportunity to give him the lectures on his health that might keep him alive! Why did you send him on his way?"

"I didn't. I mentioned that Professor Potter was covering for him and he was out like a shot. I do hope he doesn't hurt anyone."

"He's not going to injure Potter."

"But can we say the reverse?"

X

X

"Alastor," Dumbledore tried for the third time to get his friend to stop reading sheafs of notepaper and pay attention to him. Or, at least, to the dinner being served. The man hadn't eaten solid food in more than a week, he needed to get nutrients into him! "If you don't put

those down and eat dinner, I shall set them on fire." He hadn't used his 'teacher voice' on Moody since he was a lad, but needs must.

Moody grumbled as he tucked the pages away. "I was trying to study for tomorrow," he grumbled.

"As glad as I am to see you preparing to teach-

"I'm attending, Albus! The Third Year classes to start."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The Sixth Year class was too advanced for me. I've gotten out of practice or something. I need some refreshers before I try the later classes."

"Alastor... are you trying to tell me you intend to be a *student* ? A student in the class you were hired to teach?"

"And miss the chance to study with Professor Potter? Are you *mad* ? The Aurors are turning out some of the best recruits we've ever had and it's thanks to him; I'm not going to give up an opportunity like this."

"Ah." Dumbledore sighed. Apparently the madness that had infected his castle since Potter had come to it was contagious. It was too late to do anything about it, though. He didn't like to think about the fact that the boy was essentially building a private army-the only thing that kept him from being up late every night was that his guest lecturer clearly had no idea how loyal his students were.

"You'd do well to sit in on his classes, Albus," Dumbledore was pulled from his thoughts by Moody speaking through a mouthful of food. "He heavily emphasizes transfiguration and conjuration."

"Interesting. I had gathered something of the sort from the various incident reports involving Auror trainees. No animation?"

"Not really, no."

"I see. I wonder if I would be doing the world a disservice if I took it upon myself to point him in that direction. Well, I'll worry about it later. Since you're feeling more like yourself, might I ask you to put your paranoid tendencies to use?" Moody cocked his head and continued to eat. "I was hoping you'd examine the security for the grounds. My castle will be hosting a large number of foreigners, many of whom are related to influential persons. I don't want problems cropping up. More specifically: I want to avoid problems reaching the point that Professor Potter finds himself taking an interest. In other words, if at all possible, I'd like to avoid an international incident on the grounds."

"Good luck with that, Headmaster," muttered Snape.

"Thank you for your input, Severus. I wish to take whatever steps I can to reduce the chances. All the same, I have ordered a new mass-grave dug out back. Just in case."

X

X

"What did I do to get so lucky?" grumbled Tracy as she stared at a rock on the floor of the Common Room. Hari had deposited her there after taking away her wand and ordering her to levitate the thing. The fact that this method had so far taught five people made no difference to her displeasure.

"You're used to sleepless nights," Hari explained as he began his new project. The 'Hari Corner' had been wiped clean and he was now busily scrawling on one wall. Behind him, a stack of notebooks remained unopened, but from the pauses in his writing, it seemed that he was referencing *something*. "So why not learn with them?"

"Because I'd been hoping to get some sleep while away from home!" she snapped. Daphne had given her a pitying look and Hermione hadn't even given her that.

"This is more productive." Hari motioned Tam over. Tracy had no idea why the girl was still awake, but she seemed genuinely fascinated by whatever it was Hari was working on. The two were now looking over some series of runes that Hari had doodled on the ground. "Now, I'm trying to derive a common set of rules so I can create a new version of the effect," Hari said.

"Just so long as you keep the power-runes separate!" Tam hissed. "I don't need to find out what this mess does before it's ready."

"I already told you what it does."

"I'm not entirely sure I believe you. I probably should, given that you've been right so far. But that makes me even *less* inclined to find out, since it's unlikely to be healthy for us. From what you've said, doing this wrong will result in a distinctly unpleasant experience."

"If you don't dodge fast enough. Are you saying I haven't been teaching properly?"

"No!" Tam raised her hands as though warding off the thought. "Not at all. Just saying that it could do damage."

"I have other projects I could show you."

"I think one will be enough for the time being. This is an interesting spell you've outlined. It's clear that they're related, but the problem is figuring out which parts are incidental. That part over there that stabilizes the connection is definitely necessary. It's just logical."

"Yeah. But how much of the target designation is inherent to the overall set and how much needs to be built from scratch each time?"

Tracy sighed and rubbed her forehead. None of this was helping her with wandless magic.

X

X

"Alastor," Dumbledore held out the bowl from his desk. "Care for a lemon drop?" He lifted another bowl, "how about one of these delightful Muggle treats called Warheads?"

"No thank you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore wondered why no one ever took one of his proffered candies; perhaps he should have done something to combat the rumors that he laced them with drugs. Aside from a mild mellowness creme he sometimes popped, he tried to avoid mood-altering substances in general. And why he would continually dose himself with veritaserum was beyond him, so how people thought he'd eat the candy he offered if it were treated like that... "Does this meeting mean you've been contacted by Voldemort?"

"Actually, I wanted to ask you who it was who attacked the fake me."

"Ah. That would be Miss Parkinson. She was most... efficient in her assault. She shoved a firearm in his mouth. That was how I knew it couldn't be you: you'd have dodged."

"*Parkinson ?*" Moody's horribly maimed jaw dropped. "I was saved because of a Parkinson?"

"In fairness, I suspect she was more concerned about the impostor's presence than your predicament."

"Oh. Still... does that mean she's not in on it?"

"Considering she's a friend of Professor Potter? I highly doubt she's involved. His companions are impressively loyal to him."

"Of course they are! He's *Professor Potter !*"

Dumbledore sighed. Seeing the grizzled ex-Auror acting like an excited fanboy was as worrying as it was amusing. How did Professor Potter manage this? The Headmaster had taken great pains to avoid knowing the exact details of Professor Potter's

Aggressive Defense courses, but he knew enough to be quietly horrified and wish that he'd been able to avoid starting this wretched series of events in the first place. He decided to put that aside for another time. "How went your inspection of security?"

"Things are pretty solid. I noticed some additions to the wards since I was last here."

"Yes, well, we've had a rash of problems and as much as Professor Potter has solved them for me, I would prefer they never reach that point. Especially on my grounds, near my students. That's why I asked you to be here this year. I've come to the realization that anything truly dangerous will be dealt with by my guest lecturer, but by that time, it may have caused more chaos than I want in my school."

"You had a problem with possession?"

"Indeed. There's a reason I made being possessed by Voldemort an official infraction of school rules."

"And basilisks?"

"One almost a thousand years old, yes. It went around petrifying students. No lasting harm aside from delaying their education a bit, but I'd rather it not repeat."

"And horcruxes?"

"It was behind the basilisk problem. Professor Potter's solution was... unique. I've never seen an evil soul-shard reform."

"It came back together?"

"No, no; it stopped being evil."

"Oh."

"I should probably just let you know that it's currently Ginevra Tam Riddle Weasley. She goes by Tam these days and spends much of her time learning obscure bits of magic and avoiding making trouble. The Weasley family has been a good influence, I feel."

"You have a shard of a soul wandering around the school?"

"She's quite polite to almost everyone. I think the only person she's short with is Professor Potter. As far as I know, that's a nearly universal response, though."

"That explains the red eyes. I gather you also had a problem with animagi?"

"Two of them. One was Peter Pettigrew."

"He's dead."

"Funny thing: the same was said about Barty Crouch Junior."

"Point."

"The other was Sirius Black. He's-"

"Innocent? I know. Who else would Amelia have look into it? I'm retired so there's no paper trail to my investigation. By the way, did you know you have a tree patrolling the ground with a woodsman's ax?"

"I didn't know it was patrolling or that it had stolen Hagrid's ax, but I knew about the tree."

"I don't know if it'll be of any help, but it was marching along the border of the Forbidden Forest and there were a few dead critters that I'm guessing had tried to cross."

"I'll leave it be, then."

"By the way, the changes to the wards, how recent are they?"

"Last three years. Professor Potter's tenure with us has been most eventful."

"Oh."

X

X

==OMake==

Arnold paged through the reports that had been filed that morning. Most of it was rather routine. A dictator's enemies had been quietly silenced and evidence of their treason adequately planted. Nothing special by the standards of the Dawn, but it paid the bills. Not that they were particularly expensive bills; Professor Potter had selected a small, mildly dingy office building to base their operations instead of a more luxurious setting. It kept the rent down. Besides, as trained wizards, things like space and cleanliness were more or less at-will. That was why their closet had so much room, after all. There were a couple others with the usual reports of criminal activity for which the firm was being paid.

Then there was Kirkbane. It had not just been a couple of pages filled out in ballpoint and sent by owl while the operative went home to relax. It had arrived in a shrunken archive box filled with pictures, samples, and a pair of Muggle cam-corders. He was wondering how what should have been a quick job for anyone with a wand had somehow resulted in this much stuff cluttering his already-full desk. All that Kirkbane had needed to do was go to Maryland and find three missing teenagers whose parents were not their usual sort of client. That had been one of the oddest parts-being hired by a trio of middle-class, American families to investigate something that the Muggles could surely handle themselves.

Or perhaps not, given the things Arnold was now going through. He set the cam-corders aside for later examination and instead started with the pictures. Moments later, he was summoning a reference

book and comparing them. This was some seriously fucked up shit they'd been sent to deal with, it seemed. There was an effigy made of sticks and hair glued together with something suspiciously reddish brown and gooey, too. It took him an hour and a half to come up with a few possible answers for what in the hell had been out there and none of the answers were really comforting.

The good news was that two of the teens had been found alive. Ish. Kirkbane included a rather detailed account of their catatonic state. It was going to be a problem. Arnold wasn't sure how they could return the kids to their parents like this. This looked like a job for the Obliviators. But they didn't farm out work at the Dawn and Arnold had been hired to deal with this stuff so Professor Potter didn't have to. That meant he had to make a couple of tough choices.

His letter back to Kirkbane first instructed him to deliver the teens to a safe house for now and then included the rest of his marching orders. In the meantime, Arnold had a good bit of work ahead of him. He had to find someone who specialized in therapeutic magic to induct into the Dawn despite their outfit not really being the kind of place those folks liked to work. And he had to figure out how to tell the parents that one child was dead through causes he couldn't discuss, while the other two were going to need to recover before they could be returned. Technically, the Dawn had only been hired to *find* them, but Arnold felt that returning them in less than functioning condition might not live up to what was expected of the firm. And there was the last task, but thankfully, that one was in Kirkbane's hands. Oh, and he had to figure out how to explain this to Professor Potter.

(A/N John)

And so we publish again. You will be glad to know we are only a few more chapters from death.

(A/N 2 John)

Arnold got a positive reception last time, so he makes a return. Also, he's fun to write for now. I usually prefer to show things from the outside and Arnold is an excellent way for me to do just that.

(A/N 3 John)

He's got at least one more appearance coming up. Possibly more if I can think of other things for him to do. Spoon was the one who suggested what mess the Dawn has gotten mixed up in.

Arrested Arrivals

Chapter 76: Arrested Arrivals

It was somewhat novel, Hari found, to almost be part of the crowd when it came to reading the news. Thanks to Tracy and Hermione, they had ready access to three papers. The *Profit* always provided amusement. He wasn't sure there was anyone in the whole school, let alone in Slytherin, who believed anything in it anymore. The facts of Hari's presence in the world and that there had been effective media blackouts regarding a werewolf Professor, random petrifications, and Professor Potter's lessons meant that no one trusted the reporters to find their asses even with a map and a skilled guide.

Virtually no one read the *Quibbler*, but it had interesting views on what took place in the world at large.; part of the reason for the poor circulation is that it covered a great deal of non-magical news which the majority of its proposed readership found dull at best (many of them considered this to be akin to a newspaper reporting on the behavior of ants-things might be happening, but that didn't make it important). Hari, on the other hand, made sure to examine that paper carefully. So much of what it said was relevant to his interests.

The list of Hogwarts residents who read *The Times* was short, but it had a breadth of coverage that magical publications just lacked. They often had the details wrong, as far as Hari could tell, but that was because no one had let them know about magic; even if the paper knew about it, though, they couldn't well publish that sort of thing without getting in trouble from a whole slew of magical organizations whose sole task was to see to it that people didn't know about magic for reasons that Hari neither followed nor cared about.

Hari was so interested in the news because it gave him a quick review of how his employees were doing. It could take a day or two

for their owl to arrive and he hadn't had the interest in establishing a floo somewhere to get their reports faster. As a result, newspapers that apparently used non-magical communication got their information quickly and could publish in advance of his receipt of briefs.

Apparently someone had assassinated some rebel in some country. No one seemed to know who had done it and there was a good bit of chaos as the man's forces tried to reorganize while adjusting to the loss of the leader. And the loss of whatever resources he'd had control of and any files he'd had. The destruction of his communication equipment had just made the matter worse. It hadn't been a difficult job, as far as Hari knew. It hadn't been particularly lucrative, but that was measuring against some of the truly absurd windfalls he'd had in his career already. For three day's work, most of it travel, it had netted the firm a healthy profit. It was just as well that he'd had someone to manage the day-to-day stuff, because it would have been boring.

As it was, Hari found himself inundated with reports from various persons. The ability to maintain perfect recall and to see multiple reports at once helped, but he still had to take time out of his schedule of not going to classes to update his dossiers. He hardly had time for attending classes, so it was just as well that he was pursuing a self-study program (not that he'd been given approval or anything, just that everyone seemed to not care). Aside from showing up to Arithmancy and Runes, he sometimes made a stop in McGonagall's office to ask her questions about some bit of magic or to ask for her assistance in planning a lesson (something she invariably refused to have any part in). That was pretty much the extent of his involvement with classes as a student. He still taught and that ate into his time, but he found it a satisfactory pursuit nevertheless. He wasn't getting paid much, but he'd been doing this for free for two years, so it didn't bother him. Besides, some of his students would probably be employees one day and it would be best to see to it they were well trained in that case.

Admittedly, most of the time, there was nothing for his people to do. Problems that required the attention of The Dawn weren't thick on the ground, but it was enough to keep them busy and in trouble. And his nominal second-in-command was doing an admirable job of liaising with clients and generally appearing to be the face of the organization so people didn't go around complaining about hiring a kid. Apparently, people felt awkward about that here. Hari didn't get it, personally.

X

X

Alastor Moody spent a good bit of his days in private contemplation, which was his excuse for disappearing into his trunk for extended periods of time. He was, in fact, working himself to the bone to try and get back into fighting shape. Never mind the standard set by Professor Potter's classes, there was the fact that he'd been beaten by a man supposed dead. It was embarrassing! And while Professor Potter had no problem with him using the Aggression Pit, there were enough classes being taught that he'd need to keep giving it up to students. At some point, he'd have to ask Dumbledore about finding a better place, because his trunk couldn't handle some of the harder stuff, but for now, he'd focus on his ability to not get caught off guard and to dodge incoming attacks.

X

X

"I know it ain't my place, Professor, but what'cher need two-dozen dead pigs for?" Hagrid asked. He'd slung the last of them onto a cart and had been planning to drag it up to the castle later, but the young Professor had shown up and decided to move it himself.

"Practicing fine details."

"As you like, Professor Potter."

X

X

Dumbledore stood at the High Table. "To those of you who didn't listen earlier this year, today if October twenty-fifth, and our esteemed guests from Bauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving this evening. Please be aware that the usual rules regarding pregnancies applies to our visitors as well. Should any of you enter into a relationship of some sort with a foreigner, you must maintain your careful use of preventative measures. If you think I would be unhappy should one of you pimply bundles of hormones should manage to become in the family way, then it is nothing compared to the full on rage that I will experience if it should involve someone from outside the school. I am a great believer in sharing as you may know and when I am displeased, I like to spread it around. *With a shovel*. So exercise care and control or face whatever punishment I can dream up.

"I understand that there are rumors circulating about the schools paying us a visit, and that these rumors persist despite Miss Granger's admirable attempts to correct those of you spreading them, that our French contingent is made entirely of female students and the Eastern European students are all male. That is patently false. How someone came to the conclusion that French wizards are forced to attend second-class magical institutions..." Dumbledore shook his head in disappointment. "But you are all now properly informed. They are as coeducational as we are. That is to say that it is only relatively recently that girls were permitted to attend instead of staying in their homes to produce children. And like this venerable institution, there have been great boons to magic as a result of the change, along with an unfortunate rise in schoolplace pregnancies that just weren't an issue when education was an all-male activity.

"That brings me back to my original point. I can't say enough that should someone manage to end my streak of pregnancy-free schooltime, I shall come down on those involved like a ton of

conjured stone. And anyone they might be friends with. And probably people in the area, too. Just to be sure. Again: NO PREGNANCIES!

"Thank you."

X

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It took no small amount of time for the students to filter out to the lawn. Classes weren't taught at precisely the same times, so the entire schedule was staggered considerably. The result was a steady trickle of students finishing their last class of the day, some of them shortly after noon and some of them barely before dinner, each having to return to respective dorms to drop off school books and the other detritus of education before turning around and making a long trek back to the entrance (or, in the case of Gred and Forge and many other troublemakers, the nearest "secret" passage to the grounds). It was a strange coincidence of the school's construction that all houses were equally distant from the Great Hall and main entrance, such that in the case of evacuation being required, all students in dorms would be at the absolute furthest distance from the nominal path to safety. When he had quiet time to think on matters, he wondered if he should try relocating things, but then something would come up and he'd find that he'd pushed the project aside.

Dumbledore watched as Minerva tried to form the students up by age, then realized that there were some shorter older years and tried again by height. Of course, given that more people got added to the clump, she had to keep reorganizing and if it weren't keeping her busy and preventing her from fretting, he would have pointed this out to her.

There was gratification in seeing his deputy torn between righteous indignation and beaming pride when the Weasley twins took it into their heads to 'help' by transfiguring the soles of various shoes into increasingly tall platforms. The pair decorated their creations with a

variety of lewd drawings that very carefully bore *no* resemblance to their Transfiguration Professor, but were nevertheless tastefully graphic. Dumbledore was fairly certain he saw *Venus Emerging* on a Second Year's six-foot high footwear and a particularly good replica of *Three Pink Women*; while he didn't appreciate them in the same way as others, there were still skilled examples of his specialty. Despite her pleasure at them showing aptitude, Minerva still gave them detentions and made them reverse their work.

Thankfully, he had scheduled the other schools to arrive later than he'd told Minerva, so the whole of the student body was actually present and had just been chivied into order before their guests arrived. A number of students were looking around inquisitively. Suddenly, several pointed to the sky. "Incoming!"

Then, the lawn was empty, save for the teaching staff (which, for these purposes, included young Professor Potter), though Moody was curiously absent. Minerva had whirled to glare at the empty space she had just spent over an hour arranging to her satisfaction. Without looking, she flung a cutting curse at Hari, who let it fly passed his face, eyes closed and apparently relaxing in the night air.

Sixteen flying horses was a bit showy, Dumbledore felt, when the Bauxbatons carriage landed. Strictly speaking, they could have done with four, maybe six if they had trouble getting the weight-charms right. It was probably more difficult to steer like that and the landing had been dreadfully loud for a delicate-looking vehicle. Not to mention that he was going to be expected to stable the damned things. At least he wouldn't need to buy dung for the greenhouses.

"It's just the French school!" came a voice from the lawn. "No threat!"

"Stevens!" That was Mad-Eye's voice. "You're not occluding your voice!"

"Sorry, Professor!"

"What're they going to do?" asked a voice from near the castle.
"Surrender at us?"

"Always take it seriously!" Moody's voice barked. "Still, threat-assessment is valid."

The students of Bauxbatons disembarked their carriage in a carefully orchestrated show of coordination. In turn, they were treated to a view of students climbing down from the few trees on the lawn, several rappelling down from the second-story windows of the castle, and no small number just fading into view from the grass. While they stood in neat, organized rows that showed their perfectly kept robes and allowed all of them to sneer at the English, the students opposite them were arrayed in a scattered pattern, keeping a bit of distance between each and all had wands out and pointed at the ground.

Madam Maxime stepped onto the lawn. "Dumblydore!" He was sure that she mispronounced his name just to annoy him.

"Madame Maxime," which he pronounced 'may-ksim-ee' in what he felt was an entirely warranted retaliation. Dumbledore had taken to completely destroying anything French he spoke in front of her. Including the slightly different inflection on her title that had implications she surely knew he knew and had to smile about anyway. Besides, she was French and if he couldn't be rude to the French, what was the point of being English? Even the *Malfoys* were rude to the French, and they still remembered their roots. "So many students. I am impressed that you feel so many have a chance of being chosen to uphold the honor of your school."

"Eet was so hard to choose, *old friend*." To tell the truth, Dumbledore felt a great deal of camaraderie with his opposite number from across the channel, but that didn't stop them from verbally sniping at one another whenever they were in hearing distance. "But they are such exceptional students, you know. Or maybe you don't."

"Nonsense." He spoke up to be heard over the quiet muttering of his charges. ('Is she a threat?') "We've had nothing but improvements to

grades over the last few years. A few casualties, but that's to be expected in an institute of magical learning."

"So proud!" ('She looks like Hagrid.') "My students are always excelling, how could we have improvements!" ('He's half-giant. That sounds pretty threat-y.')

"How could I be anything else. A true prodigy studies here." ("Hagrid's not a threat.") "And he's been such a... *good* influence." It had taken a bit of effort to say that part, despite the obviously increased academic performances demonstrated. ('Yeah, but she's a trained witch.')

"It would be the first time one of your students has been." ("But she's *French*. That negates the half-giant.") She waved a huge hand dismissively. "But enough chatter. Are we the first to arrive?" She eyed the disorganized students with a critical eye. Their disposition looked vaguely familiar to her.

"You are indeed. Igor is always running late."

"Or just running?" Her smile was sharp. It was at the back of her mind. She'd seen this before.

"Always."

"The Lake!" A half-dozen voices called out. Then the lawn was empty of Hogwarts students again.

"Kirkmort!" snapped Moody's voice from somewhere in the open where he was completely unseen. "You're not covering your fellows properly!"

"Sorry, Professor!" said a voice from the sky.

"Good occlusion, though. Stevens, take note!"

Out on the Black Lake, there was a small, black object rising from the surface of the water. As unlikely as it was, it slowly became

evident that it was the mast of a large sailing vessel constructed from a dark wood and then further darkened by the setting of the sun behind it. Despite the multiple masts, it was unrigged and clearly unable to actually *sail*. From the tallest mast few a half-dozen flags representing nations from the former Soviet Bloc and the surrounding region. That the flags should have been soaked and unable to flap in the wind that wasn't blowing didn't stop them from doing so.

"Hold your fire!" Dumbledore called as he fairly ran down the slope of the lawn. "Hold your fire!" Figures began to emerge on the deck, probably human, but obfuscated by their heavy furs. While that was likely a bit much for Scotland's autumnal weather, it still was better than what the Bauxbatons students wore, which was better suited for summer on the Mediterranean. The figures scattered as Dumbledore didn't stop at the shore, but waved his wand as he dashed, transfiguring the muddy bank into a marble bridge that he crossed. He got to the main cabin's door just as Igor Karkaroff emerged.

"Death Eater!" cried several voices on the lawn.

Karkaroff had less than a second to register the elderly wizard bearing down on him before Dumbledore caught him in a flying tackle that carried him away from a barrage of spellfire and conjured metal. "HOLD YOUR FIRE!" Dumbledore's voice boomed across the grounds. He rose and dusted himself off, standing between the downed Headmaster of Durmstrang and the lawn. "He's not to be attacked. Is. That. Clear?"

There was a pause, during which Dumbledore's eyes stopped twinkling entirely and he glared at the apparently empty lawn. Then came Moody's voice. "You were given an order!"

The barked statement drew out a reply on the riff of, "Yes, Professor Dumbledore."

"Good." Dumbledore waited several seconds longer before turning and offering Karkaroff a hand up. "I'm terribly sorry about this, Igor,

but my students are zealous in their defense of hearth and home."

Karkaroff accepted the aid, mutely staring at the place where his cabin had been. What had replaced it was a collection of metal spikes where the deck hadn't been caved in by grapeshot and explosive hexes. Everything was scorched and still smouldered as his students rushed to conjure water. Fire on a ship was a bad thing, even a magical ship. "Wha..." he tried. "Wha..." He allowed Dumbledore to guide him down the gangplank.

Madam Maxime was watching the display as the Hogwarts students began to filter back into view. What had happened there had been quite odd. Durmstrang students began to walk down the gangplank, followed by students wearing Hogwarts robes who gave their fellows a cheerful greeting. She couldn't help wondering what Dumbledore was doing at his school.

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==OMaKE==

It had been a sleepless week for Arnold Lewis. That wasn't new, though. He absently used a depilatory-charm to shave and made sure that he didn't look like he had slept on a pile of paperwork before climbing out of his pile of paperwork and putting on a pair of clean robes. He'd been forced to buy a couple of House Elves to keep the office neat and it was truly amazing how easy it was to find things now that they were filed properly at all times. Only his active-projects-pile was left alone (after a long argument with the green whirlwinds of servitude) and he often ended up sleeping in the nest it made.

With a bit of effort, he'd managed to find someone to treat the teens he had stashed in a newly-enlarged wardrobe-cum-medical-ward. It was a crapshoot whether it would work or not, but at least they had someone who could handle injuries if they came up. It was always

possible in their line of work and now the office was staffed with a trained specialist. And if she happened to also be good at dealing with the kinds of stresses that Arnold's operatives tended to acquire on the job, that was all to the good. He'd decided to hold off on the mandatory therapy for the moment, but it was probably only a matter of time before that changed.

He had Kirkbane coming in to meet with him in ten minutes along with two new employees. Well, technically it was one employee and one new asset, but that was splitting hairs.

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When Kirkbane opened the door, it was to find his unremarkable boss sitting at a gleaming desk, typing away on a computer with an expression of great concentration.

Kirkbane was a lanky man, too tall and gangly for his age with the coltish sort of movements that made people think he was a late-bloomer still waiting to flower. The fact that when in important situations, he suddenly moved with grace and care was one of the reasons that he made a good operative. Beside him was a short, portly man with a big, red face, a pair of tiny glasses hiding beady, brown eyes, and a bald spot. Like Kirkbane, he was dressed in something other than robes for a walk through London, though where Kirkbane wore jeans and a shirt-hardwearing clothes that could handle field work-the other man wore straining evening-wear, black three-piece suit, white shirt, and a red tie.

"Ah, Kirkbane." Arnold's voice was crisp and businesslike. "This must be Mr. Gormchief. I understand you've joined our organization. We can always use people who have highly specialized skills."

"I haven't signed up for going out and killing people." The man's voice was small and mousey. "Outside of what's needed for my

skills." The man could not have sounded more rudely American if he'd tried. He also smelled vaguely like brimstone.

"Of course. I was planning to settle you in an office and have you mostly act as a consultant when needed. The rest of the time, you're free to experiment as you like. There will be a budget for it. Now, I believe you have to introduce me to someone?"

The man nodded and waved a hand. "Elly Kedward." The man now sounded different; his voice was deep and resonant. "Elly Kedward. Elly Kedward." A wisp of smoke began to spiral up from the floor, growing thicker and heavier. Soon it was taking a shape.

Arnold looked over the final result. It was a woman, that was abundantly clear. Unnaturally so. She was very pretty, but there was something sinister about it. Her features were even, pale skin and blonde hair. Her ample figure was concealed, mostly, by the rags of a dress left to elements. It wasn't just that her eyes were pools of blackness, or that her smile didn't make her muscles move properly. There was something *wrong* about how lovely she was. Arnold had encountered Veela at the World Cup and they had been beautiful in a hot, sensual way. This wasn't the opposite of that; it wasn't cold and icy-it was just not quite right. "Ms. Kedward."

Her face arranged itself into a cold glare that was somehow effective despite her lack of eyes. "You had me taken from my woods!"

"I did." Arnold's eyes narrowed. "You are an anomaly. You are powerful. Therefore, you are useful to my outfit. Welcome to the Dawn."

(A/N John)

So we see more of Arnold. And there is a great deal of stuff that has happened as a result of this omake. I can't help but wonder at how I managed to end up with this sort of complications as a result of something that's more of an aside than an aside.

(A/N 2 John)

Congratulations to those of you who worked out that it was the Blair Witch Trials that was the inspiration for the previous job. We are aware that we've jumped the gun slightly-publishing the first part a little before it actually happened (October of 1994)-but that was the omake I had ready. This one now is roughly the right time. No, I don't entirely know why the parents got the Dawn involved so soon after the events happened, but that's their decision.

(A/N 3 John)

More weirdness and chaos are coming up. It's entirely dependent on how often me and Spoon get a chance to write. We're going a pretty good clip of writing these days, but I'm making sure to have a bit of padding for when we inevitably have less time to do so.

(A/N 4 John)

Not sure what else to say about this chapter. Several scenes were Spoon's idea. I just adapted them. Also, we see part of a gag about the British dislike of the French that will spill over into next chapter. I, personally, don't have anything particularly against the French, but making fun of the over-the-top options for British dislike is just too easy for me not to take advantage of it.

Agincourt

Chapter 77: Agincourt

"It is with great pleasure that I welcome our fellow institutions of magical education to join us this year for the Triwizard Tournament!" Dumbledore stood at the High Table, genial smile on his face and glittering twinkle in his eyes. "Despite some issues with handling the arrival of our honored guests, we hope to nevertheless move passed what could be construed as an attack on foreign soil." To the shock of no one, Durmstrang's students had sat down at the Slytherin table. Even with the new aurors coming out of the house, the families therein had a reputation for the kinds of magic that the school favored. They were looking around the hall, slightly uneasy at the way their hosts seemed unaffected by the destruction of Karkaroff's cabin. In fact, no one from Hogwarts had commented at all on the subject and, when asked, just shrugged it off.

"To our friends from across the Channel, I admit that we have no warmer clothing that would keep you comfortable during the increasingly cold temperatures that Scotland experiences for much of your stay here. As a British institution of learning, we are strongly in favor of drafty halls and dorms. Of course, I have no doubt that you will be fine nevertheless, as your Headmistress has certainly been teaching you how to transfigure or conjure winter garments in preparation for your trip." The Bauxbatons students, for reasons known only to them, had settled at the Hufflepuff table. They had been nonplussed so far, but now had taken to glaring at both Dumbledore and their own Headmistress. One of their number was studiously ignoring the looks she was getting from nearly half the population in the Hall. She was also the only one not shivering or otherwise giving signs of cold.

"Tomorrow morning, we will ignite the Goblet of Fire after breakfast. You will have all day to place your name in the Goblet. At dinner, the Goblet will select the contestants who will compete. I cannot claim to

know what criteria the Goblet uses to make its selection, but it is my belief that it will choose only the most qualified for the challenges that face the Champions. Qualified, of course, to provide an entertaining spectacle. This is, above all, a demonstration for the world meant to show whose school is the best until the Tournament is held again, so please set aside thoughts of being the most magically powerful or knowledgeable or bravest. The quality that I expect to be measured is how much the performance would astound, amaze, and awe viewers.

"But don't let me discourage you. I encourage all students to enter their names. We originally planned to have an age limit and require that only those who have reached magical majority be permitted to enter, but it strikes me that is a bit silly. If someone younger is better able to shoulder the burden of Champion, why should age be a factor. I admit that I didn't mention this change to my fellow Headmasters, but unless they really believe that their champion will lose to someone with less schooling and less time to develop their magic, I can't see why they would object." Both Headmasters closed mouths that had opened.

"I also wish to greet our esteemed guest. Percy Weasley, whom many of my students will no doubt remember as a former Prefect and Head Boy. He is currently Acting Head of the Department of International Cooperation following the resignation of his former superior, Bartemius Crouch Senior. He commended young Mister Weasley's dedication to the 'underfunded and ill treated department whose very existence the Ministry seems to take as an affront'.

"In addition, there is our other guest: Ludo Bagman, former professional sportsman and current Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, an office whose very existence I take as an affront. Nevertheless, who better than Mister Badman- *Bag* man- to operate a department which handles the suppression of illegal gambling. It seems quite reasonable to employ a man who currently engages in the practice to hunt down others who do so-he knows so much about the topic...

"Now, I'm sure that you are all hungry. I know that my students are used to having dinner almost an hour ago, so they are surely starving. I feel that delaying food from time to time builds character, though. It's the kind of thing that British schools are expected to do. Now, though, I am sure that everyone is properly ready for food, so I bid you: eat!" He sat down as food began to appear. The usual Hogwarts fare, of course, along with more foreign stuffs. Baguettes and bouillabaisse, strongly spiced sausage and borscht, even at the tables where none of the guests were seated.

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Fred and Forge began to mutter, heads together. The murmur quietly began to make its way along the entire Gryffindor table, people glancing around and then talking quietly. Professor McGonagall paled slightly. Her students were *never* quiet unless something was about to happen.

Denis Creevy piped up: "O, Would that we had but one ten thousand of the men now in London who do no work today!"

Fred laughed. "What's he that wishes so? My cousin, Creevy? No, fair cousin; if we are mark'd to die, we are enough to do our school loss; and if to live, the fewer men, the greater share of honor; god's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more."

George nodded, brandishing a whole ham. "By Merlin, I am not covetous for gold," (in the background, several Slytherins could be heard muttering 'just as well') "nor care I who doth feed upon my cost; it yearns me not if men my garments wear," (Ron mumbled something on the lines of 'I already do, jackass') "Such outward things dwell not in my desires. *But if it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive.*" Gred stood, his foot on the bench. "No, faith my coz, wish not a man from London."

His brother clapped Dennis on the back, "god's peace! I would not lose so great an honour as one man more methinks would share from me for the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more! Rather, proclaim it, Creevy, through my House, that he which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart; his passport shall be made, and knuts for his convoy put into his purse; we would not die in that man's company that fears his fellowship to die with us."

Forge climbed from the bench to the table and raised his voice. "This day is call'd the feast of Crispian. He that outlives this day, and comes safe home, will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd and rouse him at the name of Crispian. He that shall see this day, and live old age, will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors and say 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.' Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars, and say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'"

"Old men forget," said Gred as he, too, stood. "Yet all shall be forgot, but he'll remember, with advantages, what feats he did that day. Then shall our names, familiar in his mouth as household words-The Weasley Twins, Creevy and Longbottom, Johnson and Spinnet, Bell and Macmillian-" he hoisted a glass of pumpkin juice, sloshing much of it over his fellow Gryffindors, "be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'red!"

"This story shall the good man teach his son," George chimed in, striking a pose with a foot on a roast pig. "And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by, from this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be rememberéd-we few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today that sheds his blood with me shall *be* my brother; be he ne'er so vile, this day shall gentle his condition."

"And gentlemen in London now a-bed shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks that fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day!"

With a roar, the students of Gryffindor rose and charged at the Hufflepuff table. Most of them wielded baguettes and plates, though several of the younger students had begun to construct crude

catapults with the First Years preparing stacks of ammunition in the form of baked potatoes and rolls. "Forward!" screamed Gred, rushing a Bauxbaton student using his loaf as a spear. The boy was knocked onto the table behind him and skidded through a pot of soup and onto the lap of a Hufflepuff Prefect, who promptly scooped up a chicken leg and tossed it at Forge. "Traitor!" cried the redhead as he was caught in the cheek.

The Ravenclaw table was about to stay out of it until some of the Gryffindor artillery overshot and landed amidtables. The eruption of mash and salad dressing was treated with the same severity as a flow of lava rushing for their precious books. With narrowed eyes, they calmly transfigured bowls into helmets and began to lob their dinners at the melee one table over.

Slytherins, who by their nature, are a little more cautious, had seen the way the wind was blowing and the Seventh Years had begun to conjure shields. They conferred amongst themselves, then the Fifth Years were ordered to prevent the guests from interfering while the rest of the house grimly hunkered down behind the magic shields and prepared for war.

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Dumbledore hummed quietly to himself. His wand danced and a whole turkey stood up, surrounded by a bodyguard of chickens. All of them used cups and plates to fashion rudimentary armor and carried steak knives as their weapons. They arrayed themselves in an arc in front of the Headmaster and began to cut down any food that flew towards him as he returned to his meal, apparently unaware of the chaos that had begun to erupt in his dining hall. Beside him, his fellow Headmasters stared in shock, watching the violence unfolding. Snape had a hand resting on Karkaroff's arm. "Let it be, Igor. Better they get this out of their system now. It will only get worse if you try and keep a lid on it." On Madam Maxime's other side, Professor McGonagall had covered her face with a hand and

was muttering unkind things about Molly Weasley that made her colleagues look askance at her.

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Alone in the chaos, Draco Malfoy sat as an oasis of calm. His food was well prepared and he meant to enjoy the excellent feast being presented. Absentmindedly, he ducked his head as a platter laden with a stack of cups containing a yellow custard that was no doubt destined to be smeared across the clothes of the students in their brawl.

"Sorry, Mister Draco!" called a high voice from the hubbub around him.

"Not to worry, Mipsy," he replied as he held out his cup for an eager House Elf to refill. "I ducked in time!" There had been something in the air upstairs. Draco hadn't even entered the Great Hall; he'd simply turned around and headed straight for the kitchens, where the elves knew him and were more than happy to provide food. He had mastered the art of eating in a magical kitchen, putting to use Professor Potter's lessons to avoid flying kitchenware and anything else that needed to be moved on the most direct path between two points.

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It took the Bauxbaton students some time to get into the swing of things and two of the female Hufflepuffs had to quietly tackle the slender blonde whose hands had begun to smoulder when her front was doused with gravy. She had issued a shrieking challenge, her fine bone structure beginning to change before she was petrified and shoved under the table, where she would be out of the line of fire. The rest of the students had rallied and worked with the Hufflepuffs

to rebuff the Gryffindor assault, though they were all mortified at the state of their clothing.

Percy Weasley snarled a curse as he saw his house faltering. He leapt from his seat and sprang down onto the Gryffindor table where the lions had regrouped. Striding along the length of the table, he raised his voice, waving a baguette wildly.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends! Once more, or else bury them with our Gryffindor dead!" Percy conjured himself a tabard bearing gold lions on a red field and gold fluer-de-lis on a blue field. He transfigured a pot into a crude helm. "In peace there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility; but when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the tiger; stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage; then lend the eye a terrible aspect!" Percy's own eyes flashed with fiery mania as he paced, his voice rising and carrying through the lull of the fight. "Let pry through the portage of the head like the brass cannon; let the brow 'erwhelm it as fearfully as doth a galled rock o'erhang and jutty his confounded base, swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.

"Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide, hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit to his full height. On, on you noblest Gryffindor spirit whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof! Fathers that, like so many Griindlewalds, have in these parts from morn till even fought and sheathed their wands for lack of argument; dishonour not your mothers; now attest that those whom you call'd fathers did beget you. Be copy now to men of grosser blood, and teach them how to war." He pointed a quivering finger at Dennis Creevy, whose face was smeared with an unidentifiable mix of food, left eye swollen shut and favoring his left leg. "And you, good yeoman, whose limbs were made in England, show us here the mettle of your pasture; let us swear that you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not!"

The redhaired man whirled to face the Bauxbatons students, who were themselves readying for what was clearly going to be another

stout assault by the Gryffindors. "For there is none of you so mean and base, that hath not noble lustre in your eyes. I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, straining upon the start. The game's afoot; follow your spirit, and upon this charge cry 'Merlin for Gryffindor, Hogwarts, and Professor Potter!'"

The mass of stained and battered students screamed their approval as they surged towards the Hufflepuff table again with echoed cries of 'Merlin for Gryffindor, Hogwarts, and Professor Potter!'.

Hermione conjured alarms which began to blare over the sounds of comestible battle and piles of gunpowder she set alight to explode and fill the air with a gritty, black smoke. She then sat back behind a shield spell with a self-satisfied grin that few noticed, but she seemed to be taking immense pleasure in the chaos she'd added to the mess.

Professor McGonagall had switched subjects and was now questioning the parentage of the entire Weasley brood, suggesting that Molly had coupled with an increasingly unlikely series of partners, most of them of a non-humanoid variety, and several quite vile. Professor Vector had taken McGonagall's wand and was not planning to return it until morning.

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From out of the chaos came a baguette, launched at missile-speed towards the head table. There was some shock from the guest Headmasters, though not much from the staff, as the turkey bravely stood its ground and was impaled by the bread. It flew backwards and landed on Dumbledore's plate, where the bearded man scowled and began to pick bits of sweet potato from his beard.

The rank and file chickens gathered in a huddle. Their stubby wings gesticulated wildly for a few moments. One of them smacked another on the severed neck. Then came the overlaying of wings in

the center of their circle. The group broke up and trotted over to surround the fallen turkey. One began to wave its wings in a series of careful gestures while another dragged over a glass of wine it had seized from Severus Snape's unresisting hand-the man couldn't bring himself to refuse and thereby miss whatever was going to happen next. Two more began to use blood oozing from Hagrid's steak (also stolen) to draw symbols on the white tablecloth.

Karkaroff watched in blanched terror as the scene unfolded. He recognized what was going on. It was only slightly surprising to him when the turkey lurched to its drumsticks and began to shamble back into position in front of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, baguette still piercing all the way through its body.

"Dumbledore," hissed the master of Durmstrang, not taking his eyes from the animated bird. "That was an *Inferi* ritual! Your puppets just used an *Inferi* ritual!"

"Did they?" asked Dumbledore mildly as the turkey used a steak knife to spear a flying potato from the air and chucked it back into the mess below.

"Yes!"

"How odd."

"But how did-"

Dumbledore cut the man off by rising to his feet and conjuring a live turkey into the air before exploding it, sending flaming bits of gore down on the scrum. "Thank you, everyone, for that stirring performance." He managed to sound less pleased, possibly because his eyebrows had gravy in them. "However, I find that mealtime has come to an end as we all need our sleep. Our guests have had long journeys and we have ensured that they are properly riled up so that rest will be difficult to come by. It is, therefore, my decision that we now adjourn to our various beds in order to achieve a morning leading to productive schoolwork." He glared until the last of the

fighting died down and students tromped out of his wrecked dining hall. At least the House Elves would be happy.

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==OMAKE==

Arnold watched a visibly uneasy Kirkbane leave the office with the stone that could summon the newest Dawn employee. It was time to give her a test run. He'd spent the time before her arrival doing research into the history of Elly Kedward; it was fascinating stuff. There was the trouble of historical accounts being unreliable and probably embellished, but even if only some of it were true, it meant he had a valuable new asset in his arsenal. The variety of abilities demonstrated put her far and away outside of any ghost he'd managed to find. Even poltergeists lacked some of the things she could supposedly do. There were some magical species that might fit the bill, but since they'd actually bound the spirit haunting the region, he was disinclined to believe that there was a *second* mysterious entity.

And that was why he was meeting with his new occult specialist. "What *is* Elly Kedward?" In theory, there should have been some opening pleasantries, but Arnold wasn't inclined to delve into them with someone on payroll and Mr. Gormchief had the impatient face of a man who wanted to be back in his new laboratory, playing with dead mice.

The man shifted nervously. "You're a wizard? Like the man who recruited me?"

That had Arnold blinking. "Yes..." he stared at the man. Then something clicked. "You *aren't*?"

"Well... I guess that to the Unenlightened—" (Arnold could hear the capital letter) "-I'd be a wizard. But I can't do things like you can." His

voice was definitely small and far too high for someone that large. But everything about the man's presence said that he was a rich man who was afraid of his shadow. Everything, that is, except the fact that he specialized in the truly dark occult. "We don't generally talk with non-Practitioners about this sort of thing."

Arnold made a gesture to go on.

"We keep to ourselves, mostly. Study the Craft. Learn how to commune with spirits and entities. Make deals. That sort of thing. Elly Kedward was certainly one of us. I can't say what she did to make herself the way she is, but she's some sort of in-between being. Not truly Outside but not merely one of us anymore."

Arnold closed his eyes for a moment; apparently, the Dawn was now entering into a world that wizards didn't know about. How did this happen? "Tell me everything." His day was looking up!

(A/N John)

We've had this chapter planned for what is probably a literal year. If not more. We've been looking forwards to it for quite a long time and it was a blast to write.

(A/N 2 John)

It was probably overkill to use the whole speeches, but I really liked the idea and so I did. Adjusted, of course, for the subjects. And it just felt so fitting to have the whole thing. I'd originally come up with the idea of using the speeches and then realized we should do it when there were actual French people present for the annual food fight.

(A/N 3 John)

Hermione's actions are a little in-joke, because it obeys the stage directions.

(A/N 4 John)

Also, I'm aware that I used the speeches out of order. Partly that's because I had originally mis-remembered what order they came in. But for this purpose, it also worked better. So that's why Act IV happens before Act III.

(A/N 5 John)

And the Omake shows the beginnings of an entire subplot-sort-of-thing that I have building in my head that may become a sort of headcannon for our stuff in general (when applicable). More to come.

(A/N 6 John)

And see, the turkey died and everything! There's the death you were promised!

Just Kidding!

Chapter 78: Just Kidding!

It was a crowd of hungry students who rushed the Great Hall when breakfast was being served. The abrupt end to the feast the night before had left them with rumbling stomachs and long lines to use the showers. The guests were slightly subdued, given their long journey was followed by a night of getting clean of food; nevertheless, the prospect of eating sent them moving at a quick pace.

There had been some reshuffling of seating, since the Bauxbatons students tried to join the Slytherin table and thereby be as far from Gryffindor as possible. When they were rebuffed, they colonized the Ravenclaw table to put distance between themselves and the craziest of the English they were being forced to deal with. Despite the small war that had taken place, the Hall gleamed.

Normally, breakfast was a piecemeal affair, with students showing up as they woke (sometimes in contravention of avoiding lateness to class); today, though, the Hall was packed. A total of two students had not gone hungry the night before and that increased attendance significantly to pretty much the whole of the school and the assorted guests.

Pansy looked around the overfilled table. "Where's Malfoy?" she asked.

X

X

The first sign that something was off was the lithe blonde French witch taking a sip of her water. Her eyes widened. "Don't eat th—" she

trailed off as she saw that she was the last to have started her meal. Then things happened rather quickly.

The entire contingent of Durmstrang rushed towards Millie, each calling to her (using a variety of appellations, since they apparently didn't know her name) and demanding her attention and affection. That was followed, moments later, by all but one student from Bauxbatons rising to their feet and charging towards her as well.

In seconds, they had realized that there were others interested in Millie and turned on each other, wands drawn in anger. Rune wards sprung up between the High Table and the rest of the room. The screams started shortly after that.

X

X

Fleur Delacour sipped her water and frowned. "Not just Amortentia, then." She paused. "Rage potion, maybe?" She watched the Hogwarts students quietly remove themselves from the fight and resume their meals without comment.

"Double strength, actually," the voice was mild and friendly and directly to her left.

She jumped, head snapping around to find a young man sitting beside her, watching the fight. He couldn't be more than fifteen, given that his face hadn't quite lost its youthful roundness. What she could see of his frame, under a white shirt and strangely designed robes, was more corded with muscle than pretty much any wizard who didn't play beater had, but his build was too small for that. Oddly somehow pale and yet slightly golden skinned, it put her in mind of the descriptions she'd heard of someone as 'bronzed'. Then there was the long hair, another unusual trait among wizards, who mostly kept their hair short; if that weren't enough, the rather normal black had a bright splash of red through it that made her think of a bird's plumage.

"You did this?"

"I think it safe to say that there's probably some sort of inhibition-reducer in there as well," the boy replied. "They're really bad at this."

"Bad at what?" Fleur decided to ignore that he hadn't answered her and move on.

"Killing each other." The boy pointed at a pair of Durmstrange students who were on a table, wrestling with each other and trying to stab one another in the eye with forks. "I mean, they're wizards and from a school supposedly renowned for its education of magical violence and I'm watching them just fail to mutilate their opponents."

Fleur considered that statement. "Is it bad that they aren't killing each other?"

"Well, it will hardly reduce the number of applicants for the Triwizard Tournament if they don't slaughter their way down to the strongest."

"Is that why this is happening?"

"That seems like a safe bet. You seem rather unconcerned. Most civilians would be more upset by now."

Fleur waved a hand dismissively. "It's not like I'm fond of them. The boys want to take me and the girls hate me for it. This is rather like a happy fantasy of mine, only I'm not the one doing it."

"As sound a reason as any. Popcorn?" He held out a bowl.

Fleur considered the bowl for a moment before shrugging and taking a handful. "Who are you?"

"Uchiha Hari." He turned and she got a look at his eye for the first time. It was red and black, the pattern spinning gently in a socket that appeared outlined in kohl. "Though around here I go by Hari Potter."

X

X

Madame Maxime and Igor Karkaroff were both making valiant attempts to bring down the runic barrier that was separating them from their students. On the far side of the transparent wall, blood had begun to spill as rage took hold. Any perceived slight was being acted upon as much as a lust for a student and the young people were engaging in violent discourse.

Dumbledore observed with mild interest, then resumed eating his breakfast. He was apparently fascinated by the small mound of scrambled eggs he had amassed and its accompanying collection of bangers. Beside him, Severus Snape had given the chaos a quick glance and, upon becoming certain that none of his students were involved, had decided to let this be someone else's problem as long as possible. His potion kit was under his chair so he could help attend to the fallen when it was time.

Ludo Bagman was watching with unadulterated horror and flinched as a splash of gore streaked the barrier directly in front of him.

"Headmaster," hissed McGonagall, eyes narrowed. "This is pretty much the very *definition* of '*international incident*'!"

"Really?" Dumbledore looked up. "You know something, I do believe you are correct, Minerva."

"Then help!"

"Well, while it might be an international incident, the nations in question do not include Scotland, so I think I can sit this one out." He turned back to his food.

"What are you talking about, Dumbledore?" It was a sign of Maxime's distress that when she snapped at him, she didn't

mispronounce his name. "Get this barrier down and help stop this madness!"

"That is a ward built into the castle. To lower it requires certain conditions to be met. The lack of lethal force being wielded outside its confines is the most obvious one." He had adopted a lecturing tone, though his face was conveying his disappointment in the fact that people were disturbing his meal. "There certainly seems to be a great deal of intended lethal force out there, though I am forced to note that it is being very poorly directed. I do believe there are only a handful of casualties and most of them are probably walking wounded at the moment."

The visiting headmasters stared in shock. The Hogwarts staff, having spent several years in close proximity to this kind of thinking had mostly just accepted that if Dumbledore didn't want to do something, that the list of people who could compel him was very short and that the sublist of those who were also in the area was roughly one-and-a-half: the not-quite-dead Dark Lord, and Professor Potter. Of them, Professor Potter was the only one currently active and he seemed to be having a quiet chat with the only guest student not engaged in some incompetently-directed violence.

The sign of things going further awry was only a sound for the visiting headmasters, turned as they were to face Dumbledore. From the other side of the barrier came a dozen voices shouting 'Unforgivables out!'. When they whirled, they spotted a change in the tone of the Hall. The Hogwarts students had managed a quick and orderly retreat to the walls, dragging the youngest of their peers if necessary, and had begun conjuring stone to shield them from stray spellfire. A Slytherin Prefect had pulled Millie behind one of the new protections. The general melee had grown more tumultuous, with sickly green light flaring out of the mass of humanity in twisting bolts.

Aside from the fighting, only two people weren't hiding behind some form of cover. Fleur Delacour and her strange companion were still eating popcorn and having some sort of discourse, seemingly unaware of the mayhem nearby.

"The good news," Dumbledore said cheerfully, "is that this will end the violence very shortly."

"Just as well," grumbled Mad-Eye from his seat. He ate in the Great Hall, but only food he had procured himself. He was there because the Headmaster had insisted that it was part of his job, something that he'd resolved to check his contract about just as soon as there weren't pressing issues to deal with. "If they lived, Professor Potter'd have their hides for being so damn bad at this. Saves me the trouble of having to have a bunch of idiots in my intro-course."

X

X

"I do believe you will be the Bauxbatons champion," Hari commented as his bowl of popcorn refilled itself.

"I was always going to be our champion," Fleur replied. "I am the best." It wasn't said with the tone of arrogant conceit that would normally accompany such a statement, it was given merely as a fact in the way that someone might reveal that the sky is blue. "We brought along the rest of them because many have influential families who insisted they be given a chance."

"Had."

"Hm?"

"They had families. Most of your contingent are dead. Though that fellow over there is standing out among this bunch of blundering morons."

"What a shame." Fleur took more popcorn. "I shall be forced to not endure attempts to seduce me or snide remarks stemming from my greater attractiveness. Will you be your school's champion?"

"Nah."

Fluer raised an eyebrow. "Really? You seem..." she paused, giving him a once over. "*Powerful* ." There were connotations in that statement that went beyond the normal and even what might have been the usual implications.

"I am." Hari sighed. "But I'm also on staff this year."

"*You are on sta...*" she trailed off. "Oh. Professor Potter?" She smiled weakly, though it quickly morphed into a true smile and was joined by a warm chuckle. "Even in France, we have heard... rumors. Now you've told me, it seems obvious."

"It really is. I'm actually a little surprised that no one has worked it out yet."

"Potter is a common enough name. Just because there is a famous Potter does not make it unique." Fleur laughed softly again. "Did you see that one over there? She just walked headlong into a killing curse!"

"I still find your calm a refreshing change."

"I'm not fully human. I don't have fully human thoughts."

"Ah."

X

X

"Dumbledore! Do something!" Karkaroff had gone hoarse trying to cast his way through the barrier and was now shouting at the elderly headmaster whose only response had been to conjure a pair of earmuffs and continue eating. It was because of this that he saw what happened next.

A twisting beam of green energy blasted through the barrier-suddenly reminding him that these were Unforgivables and he'd been rather foolish to not be hiding behind something while trying to

get through the ward-and straight at Dumbledore. It was horrible and gratifying in equal measure to know that the man was about to die. So when Dumbledore held up a hand and the curse vanished in a cloud of sparks, Karkaroff wasn't sure how to feel.

"Dumbledore!" he shouted. The man pulled off his earmuffs, looking inquisitive. "You just blocked the *killing curse!*"

"That's impossible, Karkaroff. You know that," Dumbledore's face bore an expression of honest incredulity. He held out a small pouch. "Lemon drop?"

Karkaroff twitched.

"Oh look, it seems they've finished."

X

X

Viktor Krum stood atop the pile of bodies, face splashed with blood and one arm sporting a jagged cut down it. His victorious smile was followed by one of grim determination. He turned and marched directly to where Millie had poked her head out from behind the stone barricade, grabbed her, bent her backwards, and kissed her thoroughly to a chorus of wolf whistles from the Weasley twins.

"Vould you go out with me?" he asked the blushing girl.

X

X

==OMAKE==

"We're going home!" Naruto might have become calmer over the course of his training with Jiraiya, but this was too exciting. "Ramen!"

"It'll be good to be home," Jiraiya agreed. "There's beauty all around the world, but nothing is quite as lovely as the beauty of home."

Then, before Naruto could remark on the poetry of the statement, he added: "The babes are the hottest around."

"Is that a Fire-Country joke?"

Jiraiya blinked. "Only by accident. Now, remember that I didn't write Tsunade to let her know we're coming back a bit early."

"Why not?"

"Because it's the spy-master equivalent of pulling her pigtails."

"You love her, then."

Jiraiya cocked his head. "How do you come to that conclusion, brat?"

"Well, you said that's how boys show girls they like them, right? Well, you're an adult, so you probably don't just feel 'like' for her. And you've known her most of your life. And you always sound a little awed when you mention her."

"That's impressive, brat. Yeah, I do."

"You also told me once when you were drunk."

"Bullshit. I don't spill secrets when drunk." Jiraiya smacked his student upside the head. "I've told you not to try that on me."

Naruto looked down. "Alright. Deductive reasoning, then. You're a... I hesitate to say this, but you're a good teacher."

"Yeah. One of my last students learned a bit too well. Went and killed himself because he'd spent too much time on seals and not enough on everything else. Still, he did manage to lead the village first," Jiraiya shrugged, "so I suppose I should be proud."

(A/N John)

Blame Spoon for the prank.

(A/N 2 John)

She said that if you weren't expecting something like this, you don't know us. I'm not sure, but she's probably right. Especially since we thought of the prank after we had written the slaughter. Something that we'd planned for quite some time.

(A/N 3 John)

As much as I would have liked to take another peek into the world of Arnold Lewis, there were things that needed to be done. In this case, an update into what's going on back home. Shippuden is starting and things are somewhere between same and different. Hari's presence in the world will have less of an effect without him being actively involved, but a few things change a bit.

(A/N 4 John)

We waited partly because my internet was down and partly because we had a double post planned and I wanted to get another chapter or two ready before then.

(A/N 5 John)

Shit is going to get weirder.

Postarithmetic

Chapter 79: Postarithmetic

"Where are your House Elves taking my students?" Karkaroff demanded as the elves in question gathered up the earthly remains of thirty-seven of the thirty-eight students he'd brought to this Merlin-forsaken castle.

"Probably out back."

"Why would they do that?"

"It's where they dug the pit over the summer."

"Pit?" demanded Madame Maxime.

"Well, it's what I usually call the communal grave we fill with the year's rejects. I haven't had it this filled since Severus's first year teaching Potions."

"You're putting my students in a mass grave?" shouted Durmstrang's Headmaster.

"No. My elves are."

"But what about a funeral?"

"We don't bother with that sort of thing here at Hogwarts. Mourning is for those who had value."

"My students had value!"

"Igor, I'm sure that you liked the your students earning extra marks, but lying there and letting you thrust doesn't make them valuable."

"And what about *my* students, Dumbledore?" snarled Maxime.

Dumbledore shrugged. "They're French. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have useful things to be doing."

X

X

"My dear Madam Director," Dumbledore said as the fireplace glowed with green flame. "I do believe today would be a good day."

"Things aren't exactly perfect yet."

"Nevertheless, it would be a good idea."

"If you say so..."

"I do."

X

X

Dinner that night was as lively as ever. When Millie had turned up, some time after classes had let out and covered with hickies, she had nearly floated. She was remarkably tight lipped about the details of her time away from the general populace, but it hadn't taken a genius to work out at least the bare bones of her experiences. She seemed a little lonely, but said that Krum had needed to go think for a bit.

The furniture was all-new. One of the upper years revealed that the House Elves had burned everything out back, near the Failure Ditch and had probably spent all afternoon rebuilding. That explained why they'd had a picnic buffet on the lawn instead of lunch. It had been a scene of carefully controlled chaos as the elves kept the makeshift tables stocked with food and drink so students could eat as the mood took them. The few who had met them before noticed that they seemed happier than ever; possibly the level of work they were engaging in was cheering them.

There had been a slight shifting of seating. Without Durmstrang to get in her way, Fleur had decided to sit at the Slytherin table, where she could talk to the interesting freak of un-nature that was Hari Potter. She was openly amused at how many of the stories about him were so blatantly wrong and enjoyed seeing his own smirk when she regaled him with some of the rumors that had made it abroad. For some reason, the rest of the table wasn't amused when she told the story about Harry Potter capturing a nundu.

She found herself intrigued by the young Tam Riddle, whose glowing eyes suggested a demihuman heritage. When asked, all she had said was that there had been an incident with a magical artifact and refused to divulge anything further. She had an unconventional view of magic and claimed it had been taught to her by Hari. It was certainly a fascinating discussion on the nature of transfiguration runes when the meal was interrupted by Viktor Krum walking into the Great Hall and striding purposefully over to Millie.

"I have to apologize for my behavior earlier," he said, his tone formal. Before she could respond, though her expression grew less exuberant, he continued. "It is unthinkable that I would assault such a lovely young woman. The fact that I was under the effects of potions is no excuse for it. I am deeply ashamed to have besmirched your honor in public, to speak nothing of laying hands on your person." He paused and took a deep breath. "However, I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me and to go out with me at your earliest convenience."

Millie blinked for several long moments, apparently a little lost.
"Lovely young woman?" she finally asked.

"Of course! You are a vision of perfection in this wasteland of unattractive creatures."

"Uh..." she pointed at Fleur, who was looking unsure if she should find this funny or insulting. "You are saying you find *me* a 'vision of perfection' while she is sitting not two yards away?"

"Bah!" Krum waved a dismissive hand at the part-veela. "She's too skinny! A real woman should have meat on her bones and look as if she can carry a pig under each arm."

"I can do that!"

"You are already perfect and you will no doubt grow only more so as you come into the full blossom of your womanhood. I ask again: will you go out with me?"

Millie tackled Krum and kissed him. "That's a 'yes'," Tracy explained to the boy who had managed to catch her and not fall to the ground. "She's always preferred expressing herself physically."

"I'm sure we are all glad for the budding young relationship of a young farm-boy and one of my students," came Dumbledore's voice, cutting through the catcalls, wolf-whistles, and general applause. "But I wish to remind the two of you of school policy regarding youthful indiscretion. That is to say: I don't care as long as there's no pregnancy. So both of you are to report to Madam Pomfrey after dinner to have her Talk."

Krum looked aghast as he pulled away from Millie. "I wouldn't dream of doing anything like that before I made her an honest woman, Headmaster! I was brought up properly."

"Yes, yes. And if you think Miss Bulstrode will put up with that, you are more of a fool than your headmaster. Both of you to the Hospital Wing after dinner or you won't need to worry about any accidents." He smiled genially at the rush of students heading to the Slytherin table to clap Krum on the shoulder and whisper suggestions in Millie's ear (many of which made her look rather thoughtful).

"Did you plan this?" Fleur asked Hari as they sat in a bubble of comparative quiet. Tam was scribbling notes in a black-covered journal and seemed happy to withdraw from society for the moment.

"Not in the least. I don't recall saying I was involved in this at all. But Millie was certainly a good choice. She has a summer job breaking up riots in magical prisons, so she can handle a little chaos. But since she seems happy, that would probably be counted as a bonus."

"Still not admitting it, *Professor*?"

"Admit what?"

"I am worried about how facing you in the Tournament is going to end up for me."

"I told you: I can't enter. My students are plenty dangerous, though."

Fleur looked him over for a moment, face thoughtful. "I'll bet you're wrong."

Hari shrugged. "What're the stakes?"

"An unnamed favor at a later time."

"Oh?"

"I'm ambitious. Who knows what I'll need in the future."

Hari shrugged. "What do I get if I win?"

Fleur gave him a heated look. "A night with me?"

"No thanks."

She blinked. "I... I don't know if I should be happy or insulted. It's *me*!"

"And you're very pretty. But not pretty enough to be worth something that valuable." In the background, Pansy had a hand over her mouth to smother her suspiciously-laugh-like cough. "Got anything else?"

"Well... I'm rather surprised that you turned me down. Impressed, but surprised. What else do you want?"

"You have to be a model," Tracy interjected. "For a lingerie line."

Hari looked nonplussed. "What she said."

"Deal." The two shook hands.

Dumbledore rose and cleared his throat. "In light of recent events, it might be expected that we would alter our plans regarding the Tournament. If you truly expect that, then you are an idiot. We will plow ahead regardless of minor setbacks like all but one possible champion dying in each of two schools. As such, the Goblet will be lit the morning of All Hallow's Eve and names will be selected at dinner that night. I wait with baited breath to see whom will be chosen by the Goblet for our visiting challengers.

"Ludo Bagman has sadly resigned from his position as a judge of this contest, citing something about needing a vacation or similar. I have no doubt that this is unrelated to the Goblins taking a serious interest in his off-the-books betting operation and his failure to pay them their cut. Nor is it connected to him cheating two of my innocent, young students who expressed their good cheer in knowing he would be unable to leave the castle for the school year.

"Now, go to bed."

X

X

Breakfast the next morning was split by an indignant shriek from Igor Karkaroff. "How did it not make the news?" he demanded at the top of his voice. "How could mass slaughter not even get *mentioned*?" He waved his hands expansively, gesticulating with an open newspaper. "Even the international press didn't cover it! *Our local papers* have nothing on it, for Merlin's sake!"

"Igor," murmured Snape, his voice barely audible over the sounds of conversation. "It's in the *Profit*. Just below the advert for adult chastity belts. See?" He pointed to an article with illegibly small print. "You need to use a magnification spell, but it has all the details and commends Mister Krum for his complete victory over his barbaric peers."

The front page of the *Prophet* was dominated by the headline: "Sirius Black Innocent?" and the subhead of "Decade-long coverup by Ministry" and then "Is Anyone Safe?". The picture taking up the rest of the page (aside from a small column of text) was of a young Sirius Black, untainted by time in Azkaban, standing in front of a rundown house with a beautiful woman on each arm. The caption explained that it was the Black ancestral home and the women were a pair of Muggles who'd won beauty contests.

Opening the small amount of actual information on the front page was the revelation that Sirius Black had never, technically, been tried for any crimes and called the decade he spent in prison a 'plot by an ambitious Director of Magical Law Enforcement to cover up his own son's involvement in You-Know-Who's reign of terror'.

Inside was an article detailing the original accusations against the scion (and only remaining member of) the Black family. It mostly boiled down to him having been accused of murder because he was found at the scene of an explosion and kept saying 'I did it'. While, the paper acknowledged, this was a solidly circumstantial case, the fact remained that he had never been, in a technical sense, charged and, therefore, was certainly not convicted. Moreover, it went on to explain that there was no grounds for the last remaining Black to have been considered You-Know-Who's righthand man beyond the allegation raised by a certain disgraced member of International Cooperation.

A second article explained how the 'valiant, brilliant, and dedicated servant of justice, Madam Amelia Bones' had undertaken the herculean task of investigating the matter after having looked for the trial records when she'd been doing a routine review of Azkaban's

paperwork. She felt it was a black mark on the department that it had taken so long to address the oversight of justice, a position the paper soundly rebutted with the claim that only someone as intelligent and lovely as her could have done this great service to wizardkind. It catalogued the months of quiet digging through records and files and asking of questions before she had been able to put together the whole story. In her capacity as Director of Magical Law Enforcement, she had issued a formal apology to Sirius Black and a warrant for her predecessor, who was declared a dangerous fugitive. A bounty had been placed on the man's head.

An entire two-page spread, entirely without pictures, dedicated itself to the text of an interview between Sirius Black, of the House of Black, and Rita Skeeter. It opened with a note that Mister Black had insisted on the use of a Quick-Quotes quill and the complete transcription of their conversation without redaction. He was entirely candid about his life with his family and the various horrors that they were involved in. It repeatedly referred to him as the 'white sheep of the family' (something that had apparently been another condition of his interview). He openly admitted to his shame that he had thought himself clever to use Peter Pettigrew as a secret keeper and that it might have been a better call to use almost anyone else. The interview skirted the edge of his time at school, focusing only on his immense sexual prowess and the vast number of his fellow students he had slept with. Regarding his recent time out of prison (the DMLE had put him on R&R during the past month) he said that he had been making sure that his great bedroom skills had not atrophied and putting them to practice with as many attractive women as he could find as well as an offer to any attractive woman reading the article to look him up.

Yet more space was eaten up by a collection of photos that showed Sirius Black with a vast number of pretty females, pictures of his late family members who he made it clear he didn't mourn in any way, a list of lingerie lines he appreciated seeing people in, and a call for Barty Crouch Senior's head. On a pike.

There was even a short piece about Sirius Black's position as godfather to young Harry Potter and the hope that his good character would help the Boy-Who-Lived become the best man he could be.

X

X

==OmaKE==

Arnold Lewis picked up the phone. One of the advantages of Muggle technology was that there was a way to communicate quickly without having a roaring fire going in the room. For one thing, despite it being autumn outside in London, in here it was nice and quiet and warm. And also, he had all this paper around and the idea of having flames near it was worrying.

"Yeah?" Normally he'd answer the phone more formally, but this wasn't the office phone, this was the work-line-the one for operative to call in on. Besides, he was tired and had spent another long day trying to balance his usual job of managing a small-yet-wide-reaching international conspiracy and studying as much as he could about the world of what Gormchief called 'Practitioners'.

He listened for almost a minute. Ms. Nimeyer paused as she was walking from the office door to the infirmary, staring at the ice beginning to form on various surfaces. "You *what*?" Another listening period. "What do you mean 'failed'?" he snarled. "We're the Dawn, Higgins. We don't *fail*!" Arnold let the quivering voice on the other end of the line stammer out something. "Fine. I'll let the boss know. You can explain this to him." He slammed the receiver down and glared at the wall for a moment. Then the frost began to abate and he pulled out a piece of letterhead.

The medic shook herself and headed for her workplace. The Dawn was full of strangeness, even more than she'd encountered during several years of residency at St. Mungo's and working in their

emergency wards. Still, the pay was good and they were always polite to her. No one made passes or anything, so it was worlds better than anywhere else she could have been hired. But then things like that happened and she remembered that for all that, they were also a bunch of dangerous freaks. And the worst part was that she was getting used to it.

(A/N John)

And so we see the fallout of the slaughter. Dumbledore is a canny bastard, isn't he? I blame him entirely for managing to cover the whole mess up by revealing a giant conspiracy.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, we see Sirius Black's sort-of return. And discover what interests him most in the world: sex and disgracing the family name (in that order).

(A/N 3 John)

We also have the planting of a plot-seed or two.

(A/N 4 John)

As for the omake... well, let's just say that it was a spur-of-the-moment idea that took off (part of it is). The other half is the beginning of another short plot-thread that Spoon came up with and was just too funny not to use.

Failure Needs Addressing

Chapter 80: Failure Needs Addressing

Albus Dumbledore looked up from the magical device he was fiddling with. It probably served no purpose, but he couldn't be certain of that until it was fixed and it had been a wonderful way to ignore the complaints about his treatment of dead people who were categorically *not his problem*. Percy Weasley had been kind enough to explain the legalities of the issue, which boiled down to the fact that, with the exception of one young man that Miss Bulstrode had punched in the face after he tried to grope her, none of his students had done anything wrong (although Dumbledore had mentally amended that to 'none of them *could be proven to* have done anything wrong') and so this appeared to be an issue for France and whichever countries Durmstrang was ready to officially admit it was located in to deal with. His tiny bits of magical kitsch had been so very good at getting them to go away.

"Yes, Alastor?"

The grizzled ex-auror and current Professor (as well as rather enthusiastic student of his guest lecturer) tromped into the cozy office and gave it a glare of suspicion. Dumbledore was mostly certain that there was nothing for the man to see as a threat, but life with his students had taught him that they could come up with some truly inventive ways of managing to endanger life and limb without trying. Besides, it was just in Moody's nature to glare at things suspiciously. If he didn't, Dumbledore might worry he'd been replaced again.

"I've had word from a mutual friend."

"Ah. Good." Dumbledore abandoned his futile attempts with bits of silvery metal and gave Moody a look that was disturbingly attentive.
"Tell me."

X

X

Hari scooped up the letter that was deposited on his plate by a nondescript barn owl. It dropped the envelope and winged off without stopping for food and nearly sending several other owls into things as they dodged out of its way.

Cream colored paper, completely without adornment. In a careful print on the front was the simple title 'Boss'. A drop of red sealing wax held it closed, cloud signet pressed into the wax and, apparently, raised to a temperature that had scorched the material black.

He blinked once or twice. To the surprise of only one person at the table, the paper caught ablaze and vanished into a pile of ashes.

"Did he just burn his mail?" murmured Fleur to Pansy.

"Mhmm." Pansy was disinclined to stop eating her toast just to answer a silly question. Besides, it would get cold.

"Without opening it?" Pansy just gave the pretty, young woman a questioning look. "I was just confirming I'd seen what I thought I saw!" Fleur sighed and turned to Hari. "What was that about?"

"Just a letter." He rose.

X

X

"Professor Headmaster!" Dumbledore grunted. He'd been up late planning things out and was now enjoying a cup of tea that might have had a few drops of Severus's brew added to it. Words weren't coming easily at the moment. The good news was that Igor and Olympe had stopped complaining for the moment, possibly because they'd gone hoarse (he'd had the House Elves spike their dinner with

a potion last night). "I'm going to have to go on a trip." Another grunt. "Something's come up." When he got a final grunt, he nodded and turned to Moody.

"Mister Moody!"

"Yes, Professor?"

"You'll be handling classes for a bit."

Moody looked torn between being giddy with excitement and frozen in stark terror. "A-ar-are you sure? I mean, I'm doing pretty well, but..." he trailed off. "Of course you're sure! I won't let you down, Professor Potter!"

"Good. I'm sure you have lessons to plan. I've got to take care of an... issue." On the last word, his face grew cold and distant for a moment, looking less like the cheerfully homicidal boy who taught young people his version of combat and more like a horrible monster from the darkness between the stars, his red eye gleaming in the shadows that cloaked his face. Then the moment passed and he grinned. "See you!"

X

X

Hari sat in first class, as he always did. He'd had a short conversation with the office manager who made sure to tell him that it was the field agent who'd requested his presence. The young man had seemed distracted and promised a full report just as soon as he 'understood what the hell is really happening in the world'. There was the bright spot that it might be something he was unaware of to look forwards to. In the meantime, he had projects to work on.

He'd picked up several other seats to ensure that he'd have room to spread out and took advantage of that by unpacking the storage seal

on his left wrist, revealing a half-dozen unfinished creations, including a thick scroll he'd been making for several months.

He got off the plane a good eleven hours later, feeling mildly productive and ready to kill someone.

X

X

"Professor!" A young man wearing a gray suit gave him a respectful bow. Despite his pale skin and blond hair, the man partly managed to fade into the background. Up until the moment he started talking to someone who looked like he was headed to a cosplay event. "I am terribly sorry to have dragged you out here."

"Ah," Hari looked at his employee. "You mean to say you dealt with the matter, Higgins?"

"No, Professor." The man winced. "I tried, I swear." The two began to walk out of the airport, a cloud of silence surrounding them as they went. "I tried direct stuff, indirect attacks. I even tried a dark ritual. Do you know what happened, Professor? He showed up partway through it and told me not to do something so dangerous!" Higgins threw his hands up in the air. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

Hari considered the matter for a moment. "This is intriguing. I'll look into it. Get back to England and tell Lewis you're on R&R for a week."

"Yes, Professor! Thank you, Professor!" The man gave him a hurried bow and rushed to the airport to confound someone into giving him a seat on the next plane home.

Things were looking up.

X

X

The target looked up to see what appeared to be a weeaboo sitting next to him on a park bench. "I have to say, you've caused one of my employees a good bit of trouble." Despite the clearly European features, the boy spoke perfect Japanese, with a Kyoto accent.

The young teen looked shocked. "I have? I'm sorry about that!"

"Yes, well, you see, my firm was hired to kill you."

"Kill me? Who would want to do that?" Despite the concern in his voice, the young man's body-language didn't change, no shift to fear, just concern. "I can't think why someone would want me dead."

"No idea. I don't ask questions like that." Hari shrugged and leaned back. "I understand you stepped in to help him."

"Of course I did." The boy paused. "Excuse me a moment."

Hari didn't blink, but nevertheless, he didn't see the boy cross the intervening space between the bench and the young couple walking on the street nearby. He was just suddenly blocking their path and, as Hari read his lips, asking for directions. A few moments later, an out of control car slammed into the space the pair would have been standing, its passing sending the boy's school-uniform rustling. He adjusted his glasses, assured the two that he was just fine, and strolled back to the bench.

"Sorry about that." He sat back down. "I really am at a loss for why someone would want me dead."

"You know," said Hari, "I can think of a reason or two... but nevertheless, it seems that it would be difficult to complete the contract. So I'm going to have to resolve this another way."

"Oh? I do hope you aren't going to kill your client. I wouldn't want someone harmed on my account."

"I was thinking more that I would find out who hired me and then let you sort it out."

"I'm not going to kill anyone!" the boy sounded truly affronted.

"As you like. As long as the contract ceases to be an issue, I hardly care how and why."

"Would you like to come to school with me?"

Hari shrugged. "Why not?"

X

X

The day was remembered as one of the school's strangest. Given who attended normally, that was saying something. A record number of students somehow avoided near-death experiences as a result of a series of increasingly improbable events. What started as simply being distracted by a conversation and missing an air-conditioning unit falling from a window became having all the dodgeballs being caught and placed on the ground with care when they flew at speeds that broke the sound barrier which then turned into amateur bomb-disposal.

X

X

"You are making today a most invigorating one," said the young man to Hari. The two of them sat on the roof of the school, watching the students below as they, in turn, watched the police come to collect the remains of the explosive device that had been sitting in the school yard.

"And you have made mine a most entertaining one." Hari was eating a bento box that the boy next to him had whipped up in a few minutes from scraps lying around. It was rather good. "Oh dear, that

truck is out of control." But his companion was already standing on the foot-step next to the truck's cab, reaching into the window and steering it safely around a knot of young mothers and their infants, wove between the herd of kittens rushing down the street, and came to a stop just before hitting the bus full of crippled orphans on a tour of the city. "Well done, that." he complimented when he was rejoined. "I don't often find myself impressed, but that was seriously good work."

"Saving people is a satisfying pastime," confided the boy. "I enjoy being helpful. It's just lucky for me that humans are so desperately in need of help."

"True. I hardly need to set this up. It's just so much fun to watch!"

"You might be the only person to think so. Everyone else just worries."

"More fun for me, then."

The boy gave him a look that might have been calculating on another. "I'd like to make a bet with you."

"Oh? I warn you, I don't lose bets."

"I don't lose either. We're about to be having the annual fundraiser-fair, but during it, money can be donated as well. I say I can raise more money than you can."

"You're on!"

X

X

The next day went down in history as well. This time because of a truly obscene amount of money donated to the school. The administration was genuinely unsure of how to spend the unexpected windfall. Everyone at the fair was torn between talking

about the diorama showing the entire saga of Izanami and Izanagi which required a magnifying glass to see the full detail of and the bank robbery that had happened the night before. People also commented on the weeaboo with the Kyoto accent who'd showed up and handed over millions of yen in crisp, sequential bank notes and who proceeded to win at every game of skill with his eye closed.

At the end of the day, Hari was sitting with his new friend, the two of them sipping tea. "Despite a very good showing, I do believe I won."

"You did, indeed."

Hari paused. "You planned to lose, didn't you?"

The boy shrugged. "I didn't care. But since you won, I shall pay a penalty. I will match your contribution with money from my own accounts!"

Hari shook his head. "Very well." He held out a card. "On the back is the name of the person who asked that you be killed. It's my business card. We don't normally do rescue work or that sort of thing, but for you, I think we can work out a price."

"Thank you. By the way, who are you?"

"Haven't you heard?" Hari asked. "I'm Uchiha Hari."

X

X

"The champions picked yet?" The entire Slytherin table jumped as Hari spoke. "Only, you guys are quiet."

"My sister was picked for the school," murmured Daphne as Dumbledore began his speech on how the Tournament was going to be a great opportunity to build on international fear of Hogwarts' new graduates and ensure that the rest of Europe remembered to bow to

Britain's superiority. He was cut off mid-word by the Goblet flaring up and spiting a wad of parchment at him.

"Harry Potter."

The Hall went silent until Daphne nudged him. "That's you, remember?"

"No it isn't," insisted Hari. "They spelled my name wrong. And I don't use parchment. Besides, I didn't enter."

"You didn't?"

"Of course not! I'm on staff this year. I *can't* enter."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Nevertheless, your name has been selected as the... *fourth* of the *Triwizard* champions."

Hari rose slowly to his feet. The entire Hall began to get cold, frost formed on the walls and a frigid wind whipped through. At the center of it was Hari, his hair blowing back from his face, revealing the milky-whiteness of his other eye as his red eye spun wildly, forming into its strange, alternate shape.

"Hari?" ventured Hermione, the only one likely to ask a stupid question in this situation. "Are you okay?"

"I lost a bet."

X

X

==OmaKE==

Tsunade glared at the beaming ray of sunshine that was also her favorite person in the world. She was planning on shouting at him and the moment she caught sight of his blinding grin, she forgot the entire rant. Instead she grabbed him up in a hug and gave him a

violent noogie that anyone not as resilient as him would have been in the hospital over. It just got sputtered complaints (although that might have been because he was currently being suffocated).

When she let him up, she leaned back and gave him a quick examination. "You're looking good, brat." It was true. His time with Jiraiya had, unsurprisingly, filled him out nicely and he'd ditched most of the orange. Despite his claims to stealth, it was still an eyesore and he now looked a little more ninja-y, even if he had bright daubs of orange. Of course, the Uchiha crest was prominent on his clothing, as though his constantly active Sharingan didn't proclaim his adopted heritage.

"Thanks, Granny!" Of course, he also had that annoying habit. She didn't need to be reminded of her age to know she was old. She felt it, thank-you-very-much.

"It's good to see you home. Now you have to leave."

"What?"

"Yeah. The new Wind Shadow's been kidnapped and-oi! Get back here! You need to take a team!"

(A/N John)

And this is the next installment. Not a terribly large amount to say here, but there is a mildly obscure reference in it that Spoon insisted we use as the basis for the chapter. So I did.

(A/N 2 John)

Shockingly enough, Hari is in the Tournament. I can't think why I would want that.

(A/N 3 John)

And things are starting to happen in the Elemental Nations. Life goes on there and there will be... incidents. A few, anyway. Some things change, but many do not.

(A/N 4 John)

I don't know how I managed to get ahead of my writing schedule, but I did.

(A/N 1 Spoon)

John wants to know if you think it'd be good idea to consolidate chapters into longer chunks since *he* hates reading fics with hundreds of chapters. He wonders if you do too. Opinions are welcome.

A Moon Finally Appears!

Chapter 81: A Moon Finally Appears!

... Or: I Hope All Ya'll Are Happy Now

"Professor Potter," snapped Dumbledore's voice through the sudden quiet. "Control yourself!" Alone amongst those present, he seemed unaffected by the oppressive feeling of raw violent death that permeated the air.

"I lost a bet!" Hari's voice was a harsh snarl, no longer the cheerful, absentminded Professor of Aggressive Defense. His skin was letting off a golden glow and appeared to have returned to its pebbled, lizard-like state.

"Now, if you please. Or I will have to write your family and tell them of your failure to remain professional." Hari took a deep breath and closed his eyes. The wind died, as did his glow. "Thank you. I believe you are required to join the other champions in the break room. Despite the fact that you have yet to use it in your professional capacity, I have no doubt you know where it is and how to get there. I will be along in a few minutes."

As Hari passed him, he murmured to Dumbledore, "I'm still going to find the one responsible and use him or her as my newest volunteer in class."

"We can discuss it all at the meeting you and I are going to have when this is sorted out."

Hari nodded and strode from the room, his posture stiffly controlled and leaving a terrified room. For the students present, it had been rather like it had two years prior, when Dumbledore had been displeased. For all that Professor Potter was a violent madman with copious amounts of blood on his hands, he tended to be as genial

and chipper as the Headmaster. It probably shouldn't have come as a surprise, then, that he had similarly dangerous depths. Doubly so, since they had attended his classes.

X

X

Fleur was grateful that she had a dose of headache reliever on hand. She adored her little sister and would happily cleave through the world if that were necessary to protect the little brat, but she was, nevertheless, unbelievably annoying much of the time. As a result, she was well-prepared for such outbreaks. In this case, it came from someone whom the entire student body apparently knew only as 'Girl-Tobi' and whose only distinguishing features were brilliantly blonde hair and a swirl-mask. And more energy than any human being should possess.

"I can't believe I was chosen!" the girl was saying. It was at least the fifth time she'd said it and Fleur was wondering if it would be considered bad form as a guest and fellow champion if she just set the girl on fire. "I mean, I was hoping, of course, but I didn't think it'd really happen! It's so cool how I beat out all of those others who entered!" *Perhaps it would be worth whatever trouble she got in if it made it quiet?* "I hope I do Professor Potter proud! I can't think how I managed to get picked instead of him, but I'll make sure to show that I deserve it!"

The quarter-veela felt a certain sympathy for Krum, who had been pulled away from chatting with Millie to be trapped in a rather cozy room with this bouncing chatterbox. It struck Fleur that Krum might be considering the same questions she was and he went to a school known for practicing the darker aspects of magic. She mentally shrugged; if Krum killed the little monster, then Fleur wouldn't get in trouble, so she couldn't see a downside.

The door slammed open and Professor Potter stormed in. His one visible eye focused on Fleur and she blanched at the raw fury she

saw there. "Did you do it?" he growled.

She blinked, then rallied a little. "Do what?"

"Did you put my name in the Goblet so you'd win the bet?"

She blinked again. "No! Can that even be done? I guess it must be. You wouldn't be so upset otherwise. Wait. How can you have been selected? I've been inundated with sound from the Hogwarts champion for ten minutes now."

"I..." Hari seemed to calm down a bit. "I am not sure how it happened. I plan to get to the bottom of it, believe me."

"You... you are the..." Krum seemed to be at a loss. "The *fourth* champion?"

"So it seems."

"But there are supposed to be three! It's in the name!"

"I am at least as unhappy about it as you."

"HARI!" Girl-Tobi had only just come out of her rant-fugue enough to notice his presence and he promptly stepped to the side as she attempted to tackle him and instead slammed into the waist of Albus Dumbledore, who had just entered the room.

"Miss Girl-Tobi," he said, calmly. "Would you please remove yourself from my person? It is unseemly." To aid in his request, he casually banished her into an armchair by the fireplace. "Now, we have some matters to address. Firstly, I already expect I know the answer, but for the sake of formalities: Professor Potter, did you enter your name in the Goblet of Fire as some fourth faction?"

"No. I was under the impression I couldn't enter, what with me being on staff and all."

"You are technically correct. I gather that all but one of the students here missed that detail and so decided not to waste their time entering to be selected against your chances. Miss Girl-Tobi was the only one who either realized the opportunity or, as I suspect, was merely stupid enough to enter anyway. However, it would seem that there was or, rather, is a loophole; you were not entered as a representative of Hogwarts and, therefore, could be entered."

"That is impressively complicated."

"Indeed." Dumbledore turned to Percy Weasley, who had followed him in his job as Ministry representative. "Is this covered in the rules?"

Percy took all of ten seconds to think about it. "No. The closest would be a ruling from 1438, when a school requested it be allowed to substitute a champion when their initial selection was killed by some sort of disease unrelated to the Tournament. Admittedly, there is a large body of rules on tampering with the Goblet, but they deal exclusively with manipulating *which* name comes out, not ensuring that a name comes out at all, as is the case with Professor Potter's unnamed, fourth faction. In all honesty, I don't think that this was a circumstance anyone conceived of-no one would want to not represent his school (sorry, Miss, I mean no offense, but the last time the Tournament was held, witches were mostly kept home) so they never thought someone would do this."

"Well then, it appears that we have only one choice. You'll have to compete, Professor Potter."

"I'm sure the other heads will raise holy hell, Professor," said Percy.

"No doubt. But since Professor Potter, despite being a member of the faculty, is not actually representing the school, I hardly see how I can be forced to listen to their complaints."

"Professor Headmaster, since I'm not representing the school, does that mean I need a judge from my faction?"

Percy fielded the question. "Unclear. There isn't a direct provision for faction-to-judge ratio, but it is a reasonable inference. The matter hasn't actually come up, but I think it would be fair to say that since the judges are, forgive me, Headmaster, expected to be at the least, biased in scoring, if not actually help their champions cheat. In light of that, it would be well within the spirit of the rules to give Professor Potter his own judge, even if that seems like overkill-because as Professor Potter would want me to point out: there is no such thing as 'overkill' merely 'not dead' and 'just-enough-kill'."

"Cool! I'll write home!"

"I'm sure I will regret that in the near future. Alastor!"

Moody stepped out of the shadows. "Yes, Headmaster?" He had only just arrived, having been first making sure that the other two headmasters were thoroughly lost.

"Do you know who placed Professor Potter's name in the Goblet?"

Moody's face screwed up in thought, turning more horrific than usual. "I couldn't say, Professor. I'll look into it."

X

X

"So glad you could make it, Professor Potter." Dumbledore had dozed off while waiting for the young man in the time-honored tradition of elderly men everywhere. In his case, admittedly, it was in a large, comfortable office, surrounded by the partially-sentient paintings of his predecessors snoozing in their frames, while an immortal firebird quietly preened itself on a perch, looking forlorn over the molting of its feathers in its death-cycle. "And even more glad that you seem calmer."

"Yes, well, I need to know who I'm going to go kill."

"Why would you kill someone, Professor Potter?"

"I was entered into the Tournament."

"Indeed. At your agreement."

"My *what*?"

"You may recall at the beginning of the school year, we discovered someone attempting to infiltrate the school, yes?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"Well, when we met about it, we agreed that we would have Alastor perform counter-intelligence."

"I don't think I like where this is going..."

"Well, as it turns out, the whole thing would have been blown if your name didn't come out of the Goblet as our foe planned. So, it did."

"Shit."

"I'm not sure I agree with your phrasing, but you have put it succinctly. That means no killing Moody because he followed orders.

"While I'm on the subject of not killing... I must mention that you are not allowed to kill or otherwise engineer the deaths of the other champions." Hari opened his mouth. "Furthermore, they must not be permanently incapacitated by anything you do." Hari closed his mouth. "Should you somehow deem one of them an actual threat-and if you do, you'll have to justify it to me-they must be incapacitated for the *minimum* amount of time required *and* it must be reversible." Hari opened his mouth. "By which I mean that they must be returned to their previous state once their status as a threat has run its course." Hari closed his mouth again. "This is an opportunity to make friends with people outside Britain's borders. For all that half of them are French, it is still good to know people around

the world. Especially the two best in their respective schools. Do try and keep that in mind, Professor Potter."

Hari sighed. "I think you've covered just about everything, Professor Headmaster."

"I highly doubt it, but with luck, I've dealt with the biggest problems. Have you given thought as to who your judge should be?"

"Oh yes."

X

X

The doors to the great hall slammed open. "What's up, bitches?" shouted a tall, lean man with white hair and pale skin. Despite the chill of November weather in the Highlands, he wore his cloak open and without a shirt under it. "Look at this collection of worthless pussies. And then there are the girls. Is that a teacher? Wow ! I'd like to discipline *her* !" The leer in his voice was enough to cause several people to shiver. At the High Table, Professor Vector grabbed Minerva's wand before the woman could begin cursing.

"This is the bunch of losers you have to put up with for ten months?" he asked, looking at Hari.

"Hi, Uncle Hidan!"

"Chimera!" A waif-like blonde stood up at the Ravenclaw table, her wand out. "Aberration!" Her wide eyes were rendered wider still with a mix of fear and fury. "Monster!" She blurred into motion, her wand flicking through the patterns for several hexes and transfigurations in rapid succession. "I will cleanse your stain from the world!"

A bolt of dark fire slammed into the man's face, scorching his cheek off. His head snapped towards her, left side of his mouth exposed to air, just in time to have a spell slice across his throat, opening an

artery and sending a spray of gore into the air. Moments later, a metal spike shot through his chest. Instead of falling to the ground as more blood poured from his neck, he slowly took a step towards her. And then another. And another.

"Unbeing! Abomination!" Her wand arced around, sending a length of chain swirling at him, wrapping around his left arm and ripping it off his shoulder. "Burn away, freak!" A gout of fire lashed out from her wand and burned his robe as he stepped forwards again. "Begone! You're outside the Circle!" Another move of her wrist caused an invisible blade to sever his left leg. Instead of falling to the ground, a needle leapt from his lapel and dove, catching the limb and swiftly reattaching it.

Hidan reached out his remaining hand and grasped the girl by the throat. "That was rude. Do you know what I do to rude little bitches who attack me?" his grin was manic and cruel, openly sadistic, made all the more horrible by the stink of his burned flesh and the ghastly view of his teeth through the gap in his face.

"Do your worst, Un-life!" she hissed.

" Happily ."

"I don't know who you are," came Dumbledore's voice through the quiet that had descended on the Great Hall. They had been trained by Professor Potter, but this was outside their teachings. Nothing had been said about creatures like this. "And I really don't care. But you will remove yourself from my castle this instant or I will remove you from existing." He didn't sound angry, merely certain.

Hidan shivered. That was the kind of tone Itachi used. He threw the blonde down. "Fine!" He turned and stormed towards the doors, stopping only to pick up his arm.

"Sorry it didn't work out, Uncle Hidan," said Hari beside the man.

"It's just as well," Hidan said, before shuddering. "There are books here!"

X

X

"Hari? Was that really your uncle?"

"Yeah! Uncle Hidan is great! But dad didn't like me spending time with him for some reason."

"I can't think why," muttered Hermione. "Was he supposed to be your judge?"

"Yeah. Well, I guess I should go with plan B." He conjured some paper and began to scribble. "Time to see if dad can take some time off!" He held out the note and his heat-sparrow appeared and carried it away in a ball of flame.

X

X

A few days later, breakfast was interrupted once again. This time it was by a swooshing sound and a second sun in the Great Hall, followed by the clattering of wood on stone and a scream of "No-o-o-o-o-o!"

X

X

==OmaKe==

Itachi sighed to himself as he tossed a fireball into the horde of clones attacking him and watched half of them dodge. Weight of numbers wasn't something that would usually work on him, but when he was facing a hundred attackers who were all using the Sharingan,

things got a little more complicated. Throw in an S-rank ninja who was possibly the only man more naturally skilled than himself who was using an assassination technique like it was going out of style and he was having to actually pay attention to things.

The more advanced form of the Sharingan wasn't even all that useful. Even if Naruto *didn't* have Itachi's old eyes, the fact was that Moon Reader was pretty much useless if all it did was burst a clone for the chakra cost.

"I'm glad you took my training to heart," he called over the explosion of a technique that tore apart the trees he'd ducked into for cover.

"What training?" demanded Kakashi, actually stopping mid-attack to glare at one of the many copies of his student which might or might not be the real one.

"Pervert said to tell you 'classified'!" shouted all the clones at once.

Kakashi turned to Itachi, who was appearing out of a knot of Naruto that exploded into smoke moments later. "Care to explain?"

"Not particularly." Itachi and Kakashi engaged in a future-fight over the attempt to strike Itachi with a Lightning Cutter. "I'm especially disinclined to have discussions with people actively trying to kill me."

"Oh come on," scoffed the only one involved in the fight to have one of his own eyes. "You're Uchiha Itachi. This hardly counts as a serious attempt to kill you. Maybe give you indigestion."

Itachi shrugged and kicked Kaksahi into a Naruto that had been preparing some sort of joint technique with another Naruto. The entire thing destabilized wonderfully and if everyone involved hadn't been operating slightly in the future, someone might have been injured. Instead, the stalemate continued.

At least until Naruto rushed a battalion of clones forwards and instead of engaging his erstwhile clan member, simply went right

passed him and headed for the objective. Just as Itachi went to chase him, he was forced to deal with Kakashi now apparently making a more serious attempt to injure him.

Itachi didn't curse, but he was forced to pull something special out of his bag of tricks if he wanted to salvage this delaying tactic long enough for it to work.

(A/N John)

There; you have the appearance of Luna Lovegood.

(A/N 2 John)

We've actually had this planned for quite some time. We figured that Luna, being better attuned to certain aspects of reality, she wouldn't do well with encountering Hidan. Also, we felt that he would be Hari's first choice for judge because, well, Hidan.

(A/N 3 John)

Things in the Elemental Nations are progressing as they do. This omake happened a short while ago, but close enough for our purposes. The timelines are synchronized only insofar as one hour here elapses in the same amount of time there. However, because of the great distance between them, it can take a bit of time for things there to be noticed on this side. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

(A/N 4 John)

Of course, it's always possible that the bends in space-time will result in something being seen at FTL speeds-therefore being spotted this side before it has, technically, happened there yet. But so far, we've managed to avoid that problem.

(A/N 5 John)

To clear something up for those who asked if they were right and those who didn't check to see if reviewers, in the great tradition of the internet, worked out the answer: the boy in the last chapter was Sakamoto of "Haven't You Heard, I'm Sakamoto" a manga Spoon highly recommends. When she was reading it, we both realized that it was the light-side version of Hari and wanted to see what happened when they met. All in all, it didn't seem likely that Sakamoto would fail to save people, but I decided that Hari would find this endlessly entertaining.

(A/N 6 John)

As for me being vague, I do this intentionally. Partly it's because I can only do the reveal once, so I like to get as much mileage before that as I can. Secondly, think of it as a shaggy-dog story. And there's the fact that I just *enjoy* being vague and dropping incredibly oblique hints. Though I have to ask: if you don't like that, why are you still reading at Chapter 80? It's not like I suddenly changed things up.

Guest Who's Crawling Out of the Woodwork

Chapter 82: Guest Who's Crawling Out of the Woodwork

... Or: How Did No One Guess?

There was a moment of confused silence on the part of the entire hall. The occupants were busy taking in what had landed in their midst (and assessing it for threat-value). While that happened, the scream had petered off into a quieter one, followed by a second or two of reflective silences. "This doesn't resemble hell." The voice was very young, and rather soft.

"Uncle Sasori?" Hari's question split the quiet.

"Definitely not dead, then." There was suddenly a dry edge to the new voice. As the pile of wood and splinters moved, it became clear that it was, in fact, very much man-shaped. A mane of reddish hair, unnaturally so, topped a handsome face that had the hallmarks of aristocracy. His torso was sculpted, revealing a well-muscled form, but covered in seams that put the Muggleborn in mind of old horror movies. And he didn't have legs.

"What are you doing here, Uncle Sasori?"

The young man's head turned to Hari. "Well, your fire-turkey appeared and grabbed me." *Away from a giant blast of flame that was about to turn me into ash .*

"That's odd. It was supposed to get dad. I'll have it send you back."

"No need!" Sasori's reply came just a bit faster than he would have liked. "Why did you need Itachi? I'm sure I can sort out whatever it is." He looked down. "Just as soon as I get this leg problem sorted out." Some further consideration was required before he added, "and rebuild my arsenal."

"What happened? Anyway, I'm in some sort of contest and I'm supposed to have a judge who votes in my favor."

"You know something, Hari, I get the feeling I should get the briefing from literally almost anyone else. I am sure you left some things out."

"He did." Dumbledore had been content to watch from the sidelines, but now that things were getting to details, it was time for him to step in. "Such as introductions. Who the hell are you?"

"Sasori of the Red Sand," the young man replied. "I appreciate that the moniker might not mean anything here, but it's who I am nevertheless." He glanced at Hari, then at Dumbledore. "I'll bite: what did he leave out?"

"Rather a lot, I'm afraid. Would you care to meet with me after our meal? I had been in the middle of breakfast when you decided to..." he cleared his throat, "drop in." Beside him, Minerva groaned and Snape covered his face with a hand, sighing theatrically.

"That'd be fine," said a man who had nothing to do at the moment and who was mostly busy not being messily dead. "Though I may have some trouble getting to it. Do you have a woodworking facility around? I think I may need some repairs."

"Professor Potter, would you please see to your guest's presence at the meeting? We'll sort everything else out later."

X

X

"You helped raise Hari?" Hermione's tone was nearly demanding.

"Some. In our... I hesitate to call it family-we spend much of our time bickering and plotting one another's death-

"That's family," interjected several purebloods.

"Is it? I'm usually pretty good at observation and I don't recall that being a major facet of family life." He shrugged. "Regardless, in our... family... I'm probably one of the responsible ones. Hari's father is certainly the most grounded of us, except maybe his aunt. Most of us are a bit... unusual. Even among unusual people."

"You don't say..." Pansy's muttered comment brought out a snort from Sasori.

"Yeah. Hari's turned out pretty stable, really. I put it down to my influence." He looked at the incredulous expressions on the faces of those sitting around him. "What?"

X

X

"Thank you for delivering your judge, Professor Potter. Please see yourself out; I was thinking I might meet privately with this young man."

Hari shrugged. "I still need to go over the grading for Moody's classes."

"Ah yes. On that subject: if you insist on taking vacations, please have Alastor focus on triage and other forms of medical treatment. Once your students are expert at that, he may resume his preferred lessons. Thank you."

Hari walked calmly out the window and vanished.

"He's been here three years now, and I'm still not used to that," Dumbledore offered as a starting point. "Does he do strange things at home?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that. Aside from much of it being secret, the fact is that I've been living with a group of eccentric people for over a decade now, exceptional folks, but eccentric. So I can't really

be sure what's strange anymore. Things that I feel would have once been odd to me are just commonplace." Sasori shifted uncomfortably. Despite the coziness of the chair, the fact remained that sitting was difficult with no legs. At least no one had asked about the two stab wounds between his ribs-more specifically, about them not bleeding.

"I'm sure you're wondering what you're doing here?"

Not being dead was the first thing that came to Sasori's mind. "I suppose I am. At the least, I'm rather surprised that Hari's father didn't make an appearance."

"Since we've brought up appearances... do you know a man named 'Hidan'?"

"Yes..." Sasori answered cautiously. "Do I want to know why you know that name?"

"Probably not. He was here a few days ago. From what I understand, he was Professor Potter's first choice as a judge. There was an... altercation between him and one of my students, after which I was forced to insist he remove himself from the premises before I removed him from the world of multicellular-organisms."

"Hidan isn't good with children. He's not really any good with anyone else, either."

"I might have picked up on that, yes. Anyway, I want to make clear that there needs to be none of this threatening to do unspeakable things to underage girls in my castle. Otherwise I shall become much less cheerful and friendly and you seem like such a wise young man, who enjoys not being rendered down to his constituent atoms."

There was a moment of darkness in the room that put Sasori in mind of an angry Tobi. Then it passed and all that sat before him was an elderly man with a look of vapid good-humor on his face.

"Well, I'm not exactly good with young people, but I'm much more stable than Hidan. I just don't particularly like children. I'll happily keep to myself, though, if you happen to have a ready supply of wood, metal, and the tools to work them. Maybe some textiles as well. It's been a long time since I could just sit in a workshop and fiddle."

"That sounds remarkably tame."

"If you happen to have access to chemistry equipment and noxious substances, that would be useful as well."

"There we go. Now I feel like I'm talking to someone related to Professor Potter. While I don't know everything that happens in my castle, I am sure that Professor Potter knows a place that is sufficiently well-ventilated that whatever dangerous experiments you get up to won't harm my students." He considered the matter for a moment. "I would like my castle to remain standing, come to think of it. As much as I would like to be a killjoy, I suspect that if I don't acquiesce, I will instead find you doing it anyway."

"Quite possibly. I'm sure my nephew can help me find the things I need."

Sasori looked around the room. There was, Dumbledore felt, something off about his eyes. They reminded him a lot of Alastor's. Not just a certain paranoia, though that was certainly there. Something about them... and then there was the almost frighteningly intelligent expression. It wasn't that Professor Potter was completely oblivious, but he never gave the impression of observing everything in the same way that this young man did. He couldn't be more than eighteen and was nevertheless disquieting in a way so few adults managed. Nothing overtly threatening-where those who knew how to look could see the aura of menace coming off of Professor Potter, this man seemed to have quieted that aspect of his being. Dumbledore had no doubt that he was at least as dangerous as Professor Potter, but the fact that he'd learned to hide it so

thoroughly... Dumbledore didn't know what to make of it, but bore thinking on.

"I'm glad. While I suspect that it's a non-issue for you, given your... state... I want to just make clear that should you manage any sort of sexual relations with any females who are enrolled here or are guests in my castle, you are to take steps to prevent pregnancy. I know that young people like to experiment and that school is the place for learning, I nevertheless have a strict policy about people involved in someone getting knocked up the properties of which would be called 'draconian' if that weren't too mild." There wasn't a flicker of a threat to his jovial tone or expression. "Aside from that, please refrain from interrupting classes." He blinked. "I do believe I've gotten rather off-topic.

"I'd wanted to talk to you primarily about the tournament that Professor Potter is involved in. I won't bother you too much with the long and storied history of the event beyond the basics: it's a competition between three schools in Europe and each puts forward a champion to engage in tasks intended to demonstrate the superiority of the educations provided. Each school's headmaster is on the panel of judges along with a few other specialists. The problem is that Professor Potter's name was selected as the fourth contestant and if that makes sense to you, then you're up on me there. I know how it happened, but it's *still* annoyingly confusing. As such, it was decided he needed a judge to represent his interests-his name wasn't associated with Hogwarts-and he has selected you."

"I... see?"

"I doubt it. The rules state that the judges may not help the contestants. *Tradition* dictates that the headmasters assist their students in cheating at every turn and give unfair scores intended to support their own school."

"Oh."

"Oh' indeed." Dumbledore held out a candy bowl. "Lemon drop?"

X

X

"I've been good!" wailed the tree. "No fights with the trees or anything! I've even been protecting the school."

"So I'm told," Hari replied as he wielded the saw. "There's a reason I'm only taking some bits instead of using all of you. Would you quit moving?"

X

X

"Hari?" Sasori looked at the grayish pallor of the material on the workbench in front of him. "What *is* this?"

"You know, I don't really know what it's called. But it's like the stuff my arm is made of. None of the flower-properties or anything, but still..."

Sasori poked the stuff. "It feels like fleshy wood."

"That's about as good a term as I have for it."

" *Why* is it here?"

"Well, it's already leg-shaped, so I thought it might be useful..."

X

X

"Do you eat?"

Sasori looked up at the dark-haired girl. Most people would have needed a moment to sort through memories before knowing who was talking to him-Sasori didn't. Instead, his mind presented him

with everything he knew about her. Daphne Greengrass, year-mate of his nephew, sharper than most girls her age. Some physical conditioning, but nothing compared to what a ninja would undergo. The beginnings of a figure that she was trying to hide with loose clothes and uncomfortable with the interest in the eyes of her peers, although her closeness to his nephew made it unlikely that she had anything to worry about, despite the collection of hormonal teenagers around her. Observant enough to notice his own habits and interested to investigate. Possibly courageous, but she might not realize he was dangerous. Without more time, he didn't know much about her family and social station beyond that he could witness here. Apparently default leader of a quarter of the school, but without any particular ambition to use it or idea what to do with the power; unused to the level of authority that she was given by the situation, so not too highly placed. There *might* be an older sibling, but more likely that she simply wasn't from the top of the nobility. From good enough family that no one resented her openly, the lack of plots against her could easily be down to Hari again. Her younger sister was the one for whom Hari had stolen Tobi's mask and was associated with the group that Hari's friends considered to be suicidally brave, unclear how that worked. Good enough home life that she lacked any of the usual tells of abuse. Didn't carry any concealed weapons aside from a knife on a hip-sheath that she thought people didn't know about. No wand, but that was probably Hari again. And on, his mind called up the full file in an instant.

"Not usually, Miss Greengrass." He kept his tone calm and cool while he considered any possible advantages that a closer 'friendship' with the girl could convey. He wasn't sure there were any, but one rule to remember was to never alienate anyone who didn't have to be pushed away. "I rarely find myself hungry." Sasori shifted, uncomfortable with the level of sensation in his legs. He was fairly certain he didn't want to know what Hari had attached to him, but they worked the way his original ones had, only made of sturdy material. Now he was *feeling* again, instead of getting chakra responses that he'd learned to interpret.

"That's... odd." Daphne eyed him for a moment before shrugging-Sasori might have only limited experience with Hari's group of companions, but it seemed clear that they had adopted the mindset that things involving his nephew would be outside the norm. Since the Akatsuki had taken a rather similar view, Sasori could understand her position.

X

X

==OMAkE==

"Really, Miss Sakura," Chiyo didn't sound too happy. "Was it necessary to use that fireball? It seems to have set off his explosive tags. That's just wasteful." She closed her eyes and seemed to wilt a bit. "At least we don't have to go through the process of ensuring his body is destroyed."

"I didn't think he would keep explosives on his body."

"I wouldn't have thought so, but there was a second blast of fire. Do you have another theory?"

"Not really, no."

"And his chakra signature faded when the blast went off, yes?"

"Yes."

"So in that case, I have a young man to go resurrect."

"About that, Lady Chiyo," Sakura held up a hand. "Could you, just, well, perhaps teach me that technique first? I mean, I'm a medic and you're describing the ability to beat the ultimate challenge for us."

"I suppose. But you should know it costs the life of the user."

Sakura winced. "That seems like a rather extreme cost. Still... why not. Never know when it might be useful. Besides, maybe I could find a way around that little hang-up."

Chiyo laughed harshly. "Sure, girly. Let's make this quick so I can go bring back my leader and maybe take a few secrets to the grave."

"Well, if you have others that you'd share-"

"I'm teaching you how to cheat death! That's good enough!"

(A/N John)

I really don't know how ya'll didn't guess who it was ahead of time. I thought I gave enough of my usual clues and so ya'll should know how I think by now. Or maybe that's like asking someone to enter the Forbidden Forest without a map.

(A/N 2 John)

On the matter of tasks, I have good news and bad news. On the one hand, yes, dragons remain the first task. This was an event planned without expecting Professor Potter to be involved (that was one of the reasons Dumbledore had him marked as staff for the year). Also, dragons aren't exactly weak critters. Hari is a monster is all. On the other hand, as one person requested, there will be more than three tasks. It took us a bit of work to figure out what they should be, but they all amused me and Spoon, so they're in.

(A/N 3 John)

It's funny that I've actually done more work on the timeline of this fic in the last week than I think I ever really bothered with, but things are starting to speed up in the Elemental Nations and so I need to make sure that you lot have some idea of what's happening there.

(A/N 4 John)

Of course, we will also continue the adventures of Arnold Lewis and his labors as effective director of the Dawn.

First Task (The Prequel)

Chapter 83: The First Task (The Prequel)

Hari hummed to himself, the obfuscating properties of his invisibility cloak keeping the sound from reaching the room's occupant.

Technically, it would be more professional to wait for the room to be empty, but that would also, in a less technical way, be boring. It wasn't exactly a huge challenge to sneak around with a cloak of perfect stealth anyway, and it meant he could get back to his busy schedule of teaching. He hadn't planned to teach the full year and was still only getting the small salary for part-time work, but Moody was rather insistent on being a student for the time being.

The tricky thing about the cloak was that while *Hari* was undetectable, interacting with the world could still give him away. Opening a desk drawer, for example, might not go unnoticed. Which was why this was going to be fun. In theory, he could just get his answers with Distinguished Heavenly Gods, but that would be boring.

Crouching by the armchair, he checked again that his victim was asleep—he was. It would have been nice if he could just see through the desk, but sadly the thing was too infused with magic for that. Silently, he opened the desk. Without waking up, the man's hand snapped out and slammed it shut again. Huh. Hari decided to test and opened the drawer a second time and shut it went.

Well then. Far be it from him to just keep trying something that didn't work. Instead, he crept around to the back of the desk. A blade of sharpened wood extended from his index finger and he slowly sawed a circle into the wood before plucking it out. He reached in, pulled out a piece of parchment and ran it in front of his eye before putting it back and deftly replacing the circle of wood. A moment of thought conjured a seed from his palm which he pressed against the seam he'd cut. It put down roots and quickly resealed the desk.

Dragons? Well, that was going to be fun.

X

X

Dumbledore woke with a yawn and found his familiar perched on his desk, staring intently at the back of it and occasionally pecking at the wood. "There isn't a new way to get to your treats there," he told the magical avian. The glower it fixed him with was almost chilling.

X

X

November went along normally enough, despite the newest addition to the castle's population. There had been one foundation-shaking explosion, but when Minerva asked about the matter at lunch, Dumbledore had fixed her with an expression of perfect obliviousness and asked her what she was talking about. After a few aborted attempts to explain, she threw her hands up and instead went directly to Professor Potter, demanding that whatever it was he'd done, he not do again.

Hari was grateful once again for the magic (chakra? He wasn't sure about that) of Shadow Clones. Without them, he'd never get anything done while maintaining the rather busy schedule of teaching that he had as an instructor of a required course. It could be argued that after Fifth Year, it was no longer required, but everyone knew Professor Potter's views on not training sufficiently and so it was-uniquely in the history of the school-attended by one hundred percent of returning students (everyone also knew Professor Potter's thoughts about missing class). Thanks to the dozen or so clones he had running around, he was keeping up on his various experiments with runes, getting an early start on crafting Christmas gifts, working on an improved runic formula, and even getting some practice in.

It was only going to get worse when next year-he wasn't going to accept teaching officially since he liked being able to sit around in class and ask questions that the instructor was obligated to answer-since Dumbledore had asked him about at the least teaching some extra-curricular courses. It had been to his surprise over the last few years that he'd found teaching rather satisfying.

As it was, he'd had to put off implementing the results of his tests-or, rather, testing them properly-until the absolute last minute possible. He'd managed to clear his night, though, so he had enough time to make both stops. He felt bad about the mistakes he had made and the only way to partially fix them was if this worked.

X

X

A few finger jabs was all it took to numb the process. He made sure to collect samples while he was at it, since he'd hate not waste opportunities. The work would replace what was lost anyway, so it was just a matter of time and he'd got all night. Creating things was incredibly satisfying.

X

X

Severus Snape sat down to breakfast beset by a foreboding he just couldn't shake. Morning of the first task and things were quiet. He was just waiting for whatever Potter was going to pull to rear its ugly head. In the meantime, he was ravenous because despite his worries, the prospect of seeing someone get eaten by a dragon gave his appetite an edge. Of course, it would be a shame if it happened, but risks were risks and at least he'd get to watch some interesting magic. No doubt Potter would manage something that made a mockery of the task. Where was Draco Malfoy, anyway?

He was disturbed from his quiet contemplation of eggs and toast when the doors to the Great Hall slammed open and a lovely, if avian, woman stood in the entrance with fire curling from her fingers and licking out of her mouth.

"WHO?" The word was as much a bird-like shriek as it was a feminine demand for explanation.

There was a bare moment of silence before Minerva stood beside him. "POTTER!" Her own voice had a touch of roar in it as she stalked down towards the young woman who was currently shaking in fury.

X

X

It wasn't difficult for Professor McGonagall to understand why the Frenchwoman was upset. A casual glance at her left arm revealed some of the most intricate artwork she'd ever seen. Of course, since it was ink-under-flesh, it was all the more impressive. And apparently unwanted. Given how it climbed beneath her sleeve, McGonagall was willing to assume that it was more extensive than just her arms and face. "Potter, get over here!"

"Hello, Professor; hello Fleur."

"What did you do to her, Potter?" she hissed.

Hari didn't look up from the bowl of rice he was eating. "I made some improvements." A fireball flew by his nose and turned the wall it struck into a cooling puddle of molten stone. "What with the first task and all, I thought she could use some help." He continued to eat between fending off the demihuman's attempts to get her hands around his throat.

"It's okay dear, we'll get you to Madam Pomfrey and she'll get you fixed up."

"That won't work, Professor." Hari had struck a point on Fleur's shoulder that rendered her arms limp for the moment.

"You... you... *again*?"

"How else was I going to test a way to fix you?"

"*Fix*?"

"I can't exactly unbind your soul, but I was thinking I could upgrade it a bit, maybe change things up some, but I needed to get some tests done first. Thankfully, I had a couple of ready subjects." The blast of fire screamed from Fleur's mouth and struck Hari full in the face in a stream for thirty seconds. When it ended, he continued as though not interrupted, without even soot on his clothes. "And it should come in handy today."

"If you're going to 'fix' me the way you've done this young lady..." McGonagall took a deep breath.

"It's not the same, Professor. I've got a framework with yours, all I need to do is move where it's attached. Maybe a couple hour's work, tops. Though I need to work out exactly how, but now I know it'll work."

"We will discuss this later, Potter. I think you and I need to have a discussion about what you'll be doing *before* you do it." That he *would* be doing it was apparently a foregone conclusion in her mind. "In the meantime, Miss Delacour, please..." she trailed off as a handsome, if slightly ungainly young man strode into the Great Hall.

Victor Krum was definitely strutting this morning. Despite his apparent difficulties in walking on the ground, he was pulling off an exceptionally arrogant walk. Since Slytherin was in the school, that alone wouldn't have been enough to draw attention from the topic at hand, but he was also topless and sporting at least a dozen hickeys. And there was the rather simple, if well done, tattoo work covering

his chest and arms in bold, black lines that accentuated his lean musculature.

"What?" he cocked his head.

"So Professor Potter defaced you as well, then."

"Defaced'? No! This is great," Krum's mouth twisted into a cocky smirk. "Besides, Millie likes it. What do you mean as well?" He glanced at Fleur. "Oh. Those are very nice... ?"

"I'm HIDEOUS!" She snapped.

"Yeah, but you were before the tatt-" he was tackled from behind by Millie, moments before a white-hot ball of fire flew through the space he had occupied and melted another portion of the wall.

"As I was saying," growled McGonagall. "Miss Delacour, you are welcome to join me for a cup of tea and whiskey so we can commiserate."

"Can't," chirped Hari. "First Task is right after breakfast. I sure am wondering what it is we'll be facing," he said with complete sincerity. "Will it be dangerous?"

"To you?" Minerva said dryly. "I doubt it." She paused. "Did you also tattoo Miss Girl-Tobi?"

"Of course not!" Hari sounded offended. "She's my student: she'll be fine. And if she isn't, well then she fails my course."

McGonagall sighed and covered her face with a hand. "Go outside, Potter."

X

X

The task of interacting with the champions had fallen to Percy Weasley, who was the only non-affiliated member of the panel. While he technically was biased in favor of Britain, there were two factors that made him palatable: the first was that everyone knew Percy Weasley was dedicated to his job, so if he had to be impartial, he would be impartial (mostly-there was the whole food fight, but that hadn't been in an official capacity), and secondly, he was the most removed from the competition, not being an actual employee (or whatever Mister of-the-Red-Sand was). As such, he was the one handling the pre-task activities.

"Since the four of you are here, it's time to reveal what you'll be facing."

"Dragons," growled Fleur.

"Dragons," preened Krum.

"Dragons," said Hari.

Girl-Tobi's eye widened. "We're going to be facing dragons?" She made a high-pitched squeeing noise. "Cool!"

Percy sighed. "Of course you know." He held out a small sack. "Please select the figurine of the dragon you will be facing. Your task is to collect a golden egg from its clutch."

"Nesting dragons?" gasped Girl-Tobi. "Yay!"

Another sigh. "Miss Girl-Tobi?" She selected a Chinese Fireball with a little sign tagged with a '1' on it. "Miss Delacour?" Fleur plucked a Norwegian Ridgeback with a '4'. "Mister Krum?" He pulled a Ironbelly with the '2'. "And that leaves Professor Potter." Who pulled a Hungarian Horntail with a '3'.

Fleur looked at Girl-Tobi. "Trade with me."

"What? Why should I?"

"Because I want to kill something and you humans prefer it if I kill magical creatures. Now trade with me or I'll burn this tent down with you in it!"

"Say please!"

Fleur's roar was accompanied by a few tongues of flame. "Please don't make me *kill you*!"

Girl-Tobi shrugged. "Good enough." She happily swapped the figurine and began to coo at hers, petting it and making cheerful noises when it breathed fire in her mask.

X

X

The judges were settled into a position of pride, nowhere near the task. They were in a magically protected bunker floating at the top of the stadium with vision-enhancing effects allowing them to see what happened in a miniature projected on the table between them. With the exception of Dumbledore, everyone seemed a little disconcerted by their location. It was only partly reassuring to Sasori that others were uncomfortable with it, since they were supposed to be knowledgeable magic-users who should know about this sort of thing—therefore it was either something they didn't know or, worse, something they knew to be unsafe. He'd flown on Deidara's birds before, but that was different. He could see how *that* stayed in the air.

A mildly amused Percy Weasley joined them, his face wearing a wry smile. "Do you know," he said. "That three of the champions somehow knew what the task was going to be. It's the strangest thing!"

"Three?" Madam Maxime sounded a bit thrown.

"Yes. Miss Girl-Tobi was unaware of the task until the others managed their incredibly lucky guesses."

Everyone stared at Dumbledore, who was busily fishing a sweet out of his packet and looked up with a smile and one cheek bulging.
"What?"

"You didn't help your champion?" demanded Karkaroff

"Of course not!" Dumbledore's tone was highly offended. "It's against the rules!"

The staring was joined by truly impressive goggling. Sasori had never before seen such perfectly performed goggles. Igor Karkaroff's face did some spectacular gymnastics in order to have his mouth hanging open in consternation and his eyes huge at the same time. Madam Maxime had so much face that it was clearly easy for her to manage this and even get raised eyebrows into the bargain. The real prize-winner, though, was Percy Weasley, whose look of complete confusion managed to convey that he was not quite sure the subject was truly real and not a bit of sentient chaos unleashed on reality-it was an expression that had obviously been well practiced.

"I should get Poppy," Dumbledore jumped to his feet. "I think they're having strokes!"

Sasori didn't smile, but he relaxed a little inside: it was just like being home.

X

X

==omAKE==

"Boss," Charlie was saying as they goaded the dragons onto the boats. It wasn't like there was a way to hide a bunch of dragons flying halfway across Europe, so they had to transport them by ship.

At least they could use a magical boat and take the trip in a day or so, tops. On the other hand, it meant everyone, including the dragons, would be cranky and seasick by the time they arrived. Even getting to see his family (and the slightly nerve-wracking matter of his little sister) didn't make up for that. "I'm telling you that this is a bad idea. Things are getting weird in England!"

"You've made your feelings on the matter quite clear, Weasley," growled the head of the reserve's handlers. The fact that she was forty was considered a sign that she was some kind of genius. No one made it to that age without being forced into retirement by injuries. Except Boss Agnes. No could pronounce her last name, so everyone just called her that instead. She wasn't really a handsome woman, no one in their line of work was. She had burn scars that covered one side of her body in slightly shiny skin. The rest of her was pocked with scars from claws and teeth and being thrown down hills and off of cliffside ledges. Her lip was slashed into a permanent sneer and she walked with a limp from where her hip had been wounded once too often. Even her figure was nothing to speak of; she wasn't well endowed, or unendowed. She had a body to which only the words 'stocky' and 'sturdy' could apply. Despite all that, Charlie nursed a serious crush on her-she was basically the human equivalent of a dragon. When he thought of her as the toughest bitch he knew, he meant it with a sense of longing and awe. "However, these are orders that come from on high. I don't get to make choices when the people who fund us give us instructions."

"It's just that I've got a bad feeling about this one, Boss."

"You and every other handler, Weasley." She let out a bark of laughter. "You didn't think you're the only one who's worried, did you? You're just the only one who's dared to raise it with me again." She cuffed him on the ear. "Good lad. Listen to those instincts and you'll make it to my age and still handle dragons." She completely missed the blush on his face as she turned to let out a streak of blue curses at the handler whose goad had missed its mark and set the Horntail off on a roaring, fire-spewing tantrum. She glanced over her

shoulder at him. "Go get the Ironbelly on board and then bed down. Look on the bright side: you'll get to see your kin."

"Yeah, Boss," he murmured as he went about his work. "But that's a bit nerve-wracking, too."

(A/N John)

And so the first task begins. Next chapter. This is one of those things that happens when I think I'm about to get to a major plot-point: something else comes up.

(A/N 2 John)

There are times I really love writing this Dumbledore. This was one of them. Really, any time I can have him act completely dumbfounded by something in a way that makes other people question their perception of reality is a time I enjoy it.

(A/N 3 John)

You'll notice that Sasori is feeling more at home after seeing Dumbledore in action. There's just something about it that feels familiar. It's a funny thing: you don't realize how much comfort there is in that until it's gone. Now, the things that used to make him nuts... *still* make him nuts, but they also are a way of feeling safe.

(A/N 4 John)

Poor Mademoiselle Delacour. I have had this planned for quite some time. The exact details of her adornments are awaiting a later scene. For now, all you need to know is that she is livid. And that she has been irrevocably drawn into the orbit of Uchiha "Professor Potter" Hari.

(A/N 5 John)

Never fear, Arnold will be making more appearances. He's managed to get himself upgraded to full character, which means he will come and go as plot threads dictate.

The First Task I

Chapter 84: The First Task I

"Welcome Hogwarts!" Lee Jordan's voice boomed through the arena. While Ludo Bagman had been the original choice for announcing, when he had done a runner, it had become abundantly obvious that they'd need to find a replacement. Given, Dumbledore had pointed out, that Hogwarts had someone who regularly announced sporting events anyway, was there really a need to go trying to find someone special? It hadn't gone over well, but there'd been only a little time to try and get a professional. In the meantime, Jordan was what they had. "Not welcoming the deceased losers in the Pit! Let's hear it for the official beginning of the Triwizard Tournament!" There was some polite clapping. "As you well know, the first event took place at the end of October, but the judges have yet to award points. In the meantime, we're going to watch some underprepared idiots, our own miss Girl-Tobi, and the badass Professor Potter face off against the poor opening challenge: nesting dragons!

"That's right, my fellow students," Jordan's voice sounded only partly excited. "We're going to watch them attempt to get a golden egg out of a nesting mother's clutch. By hook or by crook, they'll evade or negate dragonfire and some fearsome natural weapons to steal the most precious thing a mother has! First up is..." there was a pause as he checked the notes Percy Weasley had shoved into his hands a few minutes ago. "Miss Fleur Delacour against a Chinese Fireball!

"I'm sure you all know that Miss Delacour is a beautiful young woman, but she is so much more than that. She is, in fact..." another pause and some vaguely heard muttering. "A demihuman! The lovely lady is a quarter veela. For those of you who are interested in these things, I've been asked to do a bit of flavor commentary while the handlers get the dragon in position." Indeed, down below were a dozen witches and wizards busily using a mix of goading hexes and

chains to get a huge, orange-red dragon into the middle of the arena while several more carted along the eggs. "The Chinese Fireball is not a native of the Far East. It was given that name when it was first discovered by a pair of witches in Kent! The name is a reference to the drooping whisker-like protrusions from its snout, something that was believed at the time to be a feature of men from China.

Considering our own headmaster, I am proposing we call it the Hogwarts Fireball! It's even in our motto! What? Oh. Sorry, Professor!"

The moment of quiet was just long enough to notice before Lee Jordan spoke again. "And there she is, coming into the pit now. Miss Delacour is hot, hot, *hot*!" It was a literal statement. Her normally attractive features were somehow more so, while at the same time, slightly drawn back and sharp. It gave her a face that drew to mind a hunting bird. More to the point, she was on fire. Flames hissed from her mouth in white-hot streams and surrounded her arms, giving her whole body an obscuring heat-haze. "At the sound of the gong, she will have fifteen minutes to complete the task."

A gong sounded. It was mixed with a crack of superheating air, human ears unable to identify the amount of time between the start of the gong's sound and that belonging to the passage of a giant fireball that appeared as nothing more than a streak of blue-white in the air. The dragon's head vanished in that instant, replaced with a stump of a neck and the lingering scent of cooked flesh.

Fleur walked calmly to the center of the arena and picked up the golden egg.

"With what I'm sure is a new record," Jordan managed after a moment. "Miss Delacour completed the First Task in just twenty seconds! Let's hear from the judges!" From the bottom of the magical bunker shot numbers. In a curlicued purple was an '8', in pastel blue was a '10', in pitch black was a '4', in red was a '7', and moments later a piece of wood was lowered down on a chain bearing a '9'. "And Miss Delacour takes the lead with thirty-eight points! Let's see how her competition does!"

"Up next is the handsome superstar: Victor Krum! Recently voted one of Europe's most desirable bachelors despite being in school-does anyone else find that creepy?-rumor has it he's off the market! The scion of the notorious Bulstrode family has been seen in close company with the quidditch star. He's facing a Ukrainian Ironbelly. These dragons are renowned for their magical resistance. Even amongst a species whose well known traits includes surviving the killing curse, these are specimens who are talked of as especially magic-resistant! See how the handlers are using only chains for this?" Admittedly, two of the trainers were using animated chains to keep the mother from wandering off towards her clutch, but it was still only chains. "Look at the flame it's breathing; I wonder whose is hotter, the dragon's or the French champion? I know who is prettier-sorry, Professor!"

Victor Krum walked out of the waiting tent looking unperturbed. It might be that his fellow champion had just killed a dragon in a gout of magical fire. It might be that he trusted in Professor Potter's work. It might even be that he was just a little crazy (anyone who flew like him probably was). Most likely, though, it was the fresh marks on his neck and chest. English girls, he was discovering, were rather more cosmopolitan in their views on gender-interactions. His father would definitely not have approved-would have boxed his ears and called Millie some rude names-but Krum could see the positives to it.

He looked at the dragon. He was fairly certain that the French witch had acted on a spur-of-the-moment need to vent; Krum had planned this out since he'd learned what the task was. Everyone thought flying was something spontaneous. It was. But they didn't realize that he spent hours practicing and thinking about how he could be just that little bit better. That had let him single-handedly carry his team to the World Cup. Next time he'd try getting some people who could do more than sit around like idiots while he did the work.

To tell the truth, he'd been expecting to be at least a little worried. Certainly, the dragon was big and scary and had lots of fire breathing and magical immunities, but it wasn't freaking him out at all. He

could worry about that later. His wand came up and described a quick series of motions. He'd had to adjust the plan a little, of course, because Ironbellies were able to resist the spell he'd planned to use. But Millie had been kind enough to show him a technique that Professor Potter had developed. A meter-long steel spike appeared in the air and was promptly launched at the dragon.

One of the downsides to being so large was that small things were harder to track. To Krum, this was a gigantic piece of metal and hard to miss, for a dragon, though? It was going to find it difficult to see something like this. And, once it hit, it was having trouble seeing anything at all.

The dragon thrashed about madly, roaring and trying to get the spike out of its eye. In the process, it crushed the eggs beneath it, all the while making desperate sounds of pain. Krum considered whether he'd just wait it out or not. He didn't really feel like going any nearer that mess than he had to, but if the handlers didn't decide that qualified as unruly... the dragon keened and this time it was apparently the cue for the handlers to move in.

While the men and women were occupied trying to work out how to control a magically-resistant creature flailing about in pain, Krum decided that there were sufficient targets for the dragon and strolled over to the crushed remains of the eggs, collecting the metal one that had survived the encounter. It was a waste, he'd hoped it would punch through into the dragon's brain, but apparently dragon skulls were strong stuff. As it was, he felt mildly guilty that the creature hadn't had any choice in its involvement and that his actions had cost it an entire clutch of eggs. He hoped dragons weren't particularly aware, because he'd hate for it to truly grasp what it had lost. He was going to need a lot to drink tonight.

The judges conferred for long moments before assessing his performance. The purple score came out as '5', the pastel as a '4', the black as a '10', the red was a '6', and lowered down was a wooden '5'. Krum would have liked better scores, but his plan hadn't worked as he'd wanted. It was about what he'd expected, including

his headmaster ignoring his fuck up. Well, the man *had* been a Death Eater; he probably wasn't too squeamish about the suffering of others.

"And Victor Krum gets a thirty from the judges!" came Lee Jordan's announcement for those in the audience who were unable to do basic arithmetic. "Hopefully they'll share their logic with us later, especially the headmaster of Durmstrang, whose score is so out of place among his peers that it might be considered biased-not that I'm accusing him, Professor! If I had to guess, it would be either the destruction of dragon eggs or pain and suffering. There goes Hogwarts's very own Charlie Weasley at the head of a squad, moving the dragon out of the arena. Whatever they've used to calm it, I'd like to have a few around for finals. I could make a fortune selling thembutthatwouldbedangerousandIwouldn'tdoit,Professor!" Jordan's pavlovian training had kicked in, as Professor McGonagall was simply sitting beside him, watching the event and apparently unaware that he kept stepping over the line. In her defense, she was remembering the time that she had somehow been talked by a certain student into allowing a young James Potter to announce the Gryff-Slytherin game. After that, there was hardly any way for Jordan to end up out of line.

"Next up is our esteemed guest-lecturer and most dangerous magical creature on the planet: Professor Potter!" There was a deafening level of cheering going on, made worse by the number of students who, in contravention of the rules, had decided to use magic to add to the volume or, in the case of the twins, add a full brass band fanfare to the mix. "That's right!" shouted Jordan over the din. "We've never seen Professor Potter actually try, so many of us are looking forwards to a firsthand view of his abilities. There's even a rumor of a betting pool on what he'll do, but I'm sure that's not true. In the meantime, they're bringing out the Hungarian Horntail. Widely renowned as just about the most viciously unfriendly being around, Professor Potter is facing off against it. Oh wow, that's the risk they take!" One of the dragon handlers had gotten too close to the Horntail and it had whipped its namesake through the air and

cleaved the woman in half. The crowd reacted quickly, shields going up to rebuff the flying bits of handler. The dragon roared its victory over one of the little creatures.

"It looks like they've got it in position. Yes, there they go." The dragon handlers had locked down the chain attached to the dragon and proceeded to advance in the opposite direction with alacrity.
"Now we wait on Professor Potter to astound us in some way."

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The crowd went silent as Hari stepped out onto the field. The previous champions had put on interesting performances. The dragon was a gleaming beacon of magic to his eye. Regardless, it was a chance to find out if this had worked. He raised his thumb to his lips and let his incisor slice cleanly into it. That had been one of the biggest problems-he was really hard to cut now. A moment of focusing and he pressed the wound to the ground. Smoke engulfed the whole arena.

X

X

==OMAKE==

Arnold Lewis stared at the little figurine on his desk. He had a dozen things he should be doing and he was instead staring at a thing made of twigs and string that had appeared the day before. Its intrinsic properties were harmless, yet somehow the thing had a disquieting aura that he found all too familiar. It was the same as the one that surrounded one of his most... unusual employees. There was a reason he kept her on assignment as much as he could, but she only really had a working relationship with Kirkbane, so the rest of the time, she was pretty much free to do as she liked in the confines of the Dawn headquarters.

Of course, headquarters was much larger than it had been when the Boss had opened it. What with one thing and another and his slowly growing library of files and the need for a couple of people to manage the stacks and his slowly increasing medical staff and Gormchief's assistant, not to mention a barracks for when agents were on call, he'd ended up quietly taking over a few of the neighboring offices.

The medical staff had come as something of a surprise, but he'd found that while there were only so many people who could afford to hire the Dawn to solve problems that needed a certain level of finality, the number of people who needed medical care that didn't ask questions and was willing to make housecalls was rather high. Sure, the money wasn't quite as good on a per-case basis, but there was lots of work and it wasn't like having a bunch of skilled people who knew how to handle the kinds of injuries the Dawn sometimes sustained on his payroll was a bad thing. Still, it meant that he had far more people working for him than he'd expected when he took the job.

And then there was this. He supposed he could ask Gormchief what the thing meant, but if he did, then he'd have to find out and he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know. Right now, he was able to almost pretend that it didn't matter and wasn't worrying him. There was a real danger that defense would vanish if he took steps to remedy his ignorance. Besides, he couldn't think of an answer that he *would* like. But it was still unnerving. He didn't dare destroy it, just in case it meant that someone that even *Gormchief* considered to be dangerously outside the bounds of reason would be offended.

Which was why his morning was spectacularly unproductive.

(A/N John)

Well, it's been a little while again. I suppose it was inevitable that our renewed posting rate couldn't be maintained forever. It

is what it is. Nevertheless, I hope that the insanity we are dreaming up will remain entertaining.

(A/N 2 John)

Sadly, our posting rate may remain low because opportunities to write are going to get fewer starting later this week. As crazy as it is, real life is going to come back and bite me. Nothing I can do about that.

(A/N 3 John)

Most of you probably have an idea of what is going to happen next. I promise that it's crazier than that. And it will get even more so.

(A/N 4 John)

Honestly, you can blame Spoon for some of the crazy that's coming up in the next chapter.

(A/N 5 John)

Also worth noting that I felt like Krum is the sanest of the lot. Sure, he practices dark magic, but that doesn't make him a sadist. Besides, he's standing next to Girl-Tobi, a demihuman who places a low value on human life, and Hari. Really. It's inevitable that he's the only one able to properly empathize.

(A/N 6 John)

For those of you who wanted to know why Fleur insisted on an earlier dragon instead of a different one, I hope this explained it. Just in case, here goes: she wasn't planning on having a complicated fight either way, she just wanted to kill something right then and there and knows there'd be trouble if she just murdered one of the other champions. It was a simple matter of expedience.

First Task Part II

Chapter 85: First Task Part II

... or All Hail the King!

When the smoke cleared, there was a collective silence. Standing with a foot in the arena was a giant. That wasn't a good description, because this was to giants what giants were to mortal folk. It was easily as tall as the castle if not taller. Most of the audience didn't recognize the outfit it wore. Some kind of boot made of hide with a metal guard over the calf. Thighs protected by a piece of metal covering much of the inner-thigh as well as top and outer, over some sort of puffy cloth. Something that resembled a skirt made of metal plates extended from its waist. Stuffed through its belt were a pair of swords still in their sheathes, one half as tall as the figure, the other half that. On its other hip was a jug that resembled a two-part snowman with a cork in the top. Its chest was wrapped in more metal, though the stomach protruded in a round potbelly. Its face was shaded by a broad, straw hat. What could be made out was humanoid enough.

The dragon had only two options when confronted with a creature that, were the dragon to rear up, the dragon would only reach its knee. One was flight and that was out because it was nesting and its eggs were right there. The other was fight. It chose the only valid option. A great belch of flame shot from its mouth into the creature's thigh.

"Ow." The voice was booming. Then it leaned down and a huge hand picked up the dragon by the neck. The head cocked to the side and the sun revealed a huge, ape's face, mouth opened. The dragon was lifted to that maw and it had time to breathe fire again before the top third of the dragon was bitten off. There was some sounds of mastication in the otherwise quiet arena. People watched in shock as an apex monster of the magical world was turned into a snack.

The figure popped the cork on its flask and took a swig. "Spicy." It took another bite and looked around, spotting what it was looking for down at its feet in what had been a nest full of eggs. "Hello, Lord Summoner."

"Hiya." It appeared that Hari had amplified his voice, since it was loud enough to be more than just a shout. There was a pause. "Uh... what do I call you?"

"This one is Ōkong." The last of the dragon disappeared in a crunch. "Nice of you to provide a snack on our first meeting."

"Not a problem!" Hari turned to look up not at the giant, armored ape, but at the judge's booth. "Do I get scores?"

Ōkong was roughly eye-level with the observation bunker. An eye almost the same size as it peered inside. "They seem a bit distracted, my lord." He prodded the bunker with a massive finger. "My lord wishes for your attention."

A hatch opened and a red-haired young man poked his head out. "Just a moment. They're... debating. Yes, debating."

"Understood." Ōkong looked down. "They are debating, lord." He looked around with interest and began to lean down and examine things, sending many students reaching for wands just in case. The ape merely sniffed at parts of the stadium and mumbled to itself.

From the bunker emerged a purple '7', a pastel '5', a black '2', a red '8', and a wooden '9'.

Sasori leaned out of the bunker. "Hari?"

"Yes?"

"Did you make this contract yourself?"

"Yep!"

The '9' was hurriedly pulled up on its chain and a '10' was lowered down in its place.

"And there you have it, Hogwarts. The well-known Professor Potter managed to astound us once again. Despite a distinct bias from the judges leaving him with only a thirty-one for a score, we are wowed by our Professor's conjuration."

"Not a conjuration!" called Hari.

"Yes indee-wait, what?"

"It's not conjured!"

"Oh." Lee Jordan took a few moments and then picked up where he left off. "Can it be any wonder that Professor Potter has done something as amazing as this? Ms. Riddle should remember to collect her winnings from Gred and Fred. How she knew that the answer was 'summon giant armored ape' is beyond me and if she weren't the second (maybe third, sorry Headmaster) scariest person at Hogwarts, I might accuse her of cheating. Since she is, I can only assume that this was entirely fair and above board!"

Tam, from her seat in the crowd, had the same dumbfounded look as everyone else. She might have had some suspicions from what Hari had talked about with her, but this was well and truly beyond her wildest imagining. And while he no doubt didn't tell her everything, from what he *had* said, this was more than he'd expected either. But she wasn't surprised to find that he managed to act as though this were normal. He might even not be thrown. It was unfair, she decided, that despite her future self devoting a lifetime to the study of powerful and obscure magic, that the idiot who'd gone on a dark-magic binge had nevertheless never managed anything remotely as impressive. It was all the more reason to not do something that stupid. Besides, thanks to Hari, she now understood when it was and wasn't acceptable to solve problems with violence.

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Ōkong vanished in a cloud of smoke a short time later while the dragon handlers considered letters of resignation to avoid explaining this mess to their superiors. Some of them had argued against this whole plan, but they'd been overruled. With luck, the last competitor wouldn't do any lasting harm... given how things had been going so far, though, they didn't hold out hope.

"This is neat." The foreign judges made squealing noises when Hari spoke. He had apparently conjured himself a chair and settled in to watch Girl-Tobi's attempt. "Do you mind if I examine this to see how it works?"

"After the tournament." Dumbledore held no illusions that if he tried to bar it outright, Professor Potter would ignore him. He hoped that by putting only limits, he might manage to put it off until destruction of the bunker wouldn't be a problem.

"Alright. I'll find some other project to work on."

"Hey, Hari? Was that the boss of your contract?"

"Nope."

Sasori frowned. "Mister Dumbledore? Is there a way I can give a score greater than ten with a caveat of horrified amazement?"

"No."

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"It's down to the last competitor!" Lee Jordan declared. "Girl-Tobi of Gryffindor is poised to astound us. Given that she is from the best house in the school, begging your forgiveness Professor Potter, we can expect that she will carry the day. What can be said about the youngest champion? Seriously. Aside from knowing she's the lovely

Daphne Greengrass's sister and a rampaging terror of random insanity, I'm not sure I have anything to work with. Someone should have done a better job prepping my notes.

"I suppose I can at least mention some of her more notable pranks. She regularly gets into a fight over maple syrup with Ronald Weasley and has taken to stealing his food for reasons that I cannot fathom. She once transfigured every pair of jockeys and boxers in Gryffindor Tower into lacy g-strings, although I can't prove it was her, but the fact that they all read 'Girl-Tobi was here' is a definite hint. She sabotaged every school broom so they would start to sweep the halls while being ridden. And she's responsible for our random alertness checks, which have only gotten more enthusiastic since Alastor Moody was deputized to handle them.

"Well. I know that *I'm* rooting for the dragon now. I'm sure many others are as well. Come on, dragon! Let's see a champion die!" There was a roar of applause.

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Girl-Tobi emerged from the tent with a determined walk. That lasted up until she saw the dragon. "Coooooooooool!" She ran over to the dragon, ducking between its claws to clamber up its back and pet it. "Oh wow, you're big, aren't you?" Girl-Tobi held on, still petting away as it tried shaking its head to get her off. When that didn't work, it raised a claw and swatted, sending her rolling on the ground.

She popped back up and bounced out of the way of a jet of flame. "Wee! Again!" She dodged again and leapt over a third. "You're not very good at this, Mister Dragon!" She partly lifted her mask and spat a fireball that flew across the field and smacked the confused dragon between the eyes. "You have to hit the target. Now you try! Nowhere near me that time," she scolded.

The dragon was busy blinking, trying to see clearly after having its face filled with fire. It fumbled around and grabbed a rock, heaving it at the girl while shoot more flames into the bargain.

"Better. Now you're trying!" she called as she landed on the flying boulder and let it carry her to the far wall. "But you still can't hit me!" She considered. "You're not a 'Mister' are you? You're a girl, right? Well fine, don't answer!" Girl-Tobi stomped her foot and then rolled to the side to left the grass she'd been standing on turn to ash. "You seem grumpy." She dashed over and began scratching the dragon's belly. "Maybe a tummy rub will help you?" She slipped between its legs as it tried to immolate her again. "Maybe not."

And on it went. Girl-Tobi was clearly enjoying her fight, although someone had apparently forgotten to inform her that's what it was. The dragon had managed to nearly set fire to several students in its attempts to destroy the tiny annoyance. The stands had claw marks and many of the students had wisely decided to move upwards to avoid further collateral damage.

Finally, there was a blare of sound. "And we're out of time." Lee Jordan called. "The handlers are having an easy time with this one. Not only is it not injured, but the dragon definitely seems tired. I didn't know dragons could pant. Yes, it's being moved off the field in record time. This dragon is probably the winner as the only one of four to escape without injury or death. And there's a handler explaining to Girl-Tobi that she can't stay and pet the dragon.

"Now here come the judges. They've lowered the bunker now that the dragons are gone and I think they're about to have a short talk with the youngest champion."

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"Miss Girl-Tobi..." Dumbledore frowned slightly. "You've put us in a bit of a spot, young lady. You see, there was never really so odd a

failure in the Tournament's history. Mister Weasley, would you explain?"

"Yes, Headmaster. The problem is that while there had been plenty of times where the champion has failed to complete a task or even failed to *try* to complete it, there had yet to have been an instance of someone doing something that demonstrated great skill *and* utterly failing to try to complete their assigned task."

"What task?" Girl-Tobi's head cocked to the side.

"The golden egg."

"Hmm..." she considered this for a few moments. "Nope. I don't think anyone said anything about it to me. Not when I was paying attention. Could you tell me now so I can do it properly?"

"You were supposed to collect a faux dragon egg made of gold from the clutch of *real* eggs the mother was guarding."

"I was?"

"Yes."

"Can I go do that?"

"No!" snarled Karkaroff.

"Oh. Well, I found this. Will it do?" Girl-Tobi held out a golden dragon egg.

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==OmAkE==

Boss,

Included with my regular report is my first treatise on what I'm informed are called 'Practitioners'.

According to my sources, no one seems to know exactly when or where the Practice first emerged. There appear to be fragmentary records going back thousands of years across the world. Because of this, I can't give quite as concise a history as I'd like. I can't even begin to guess where exactly it started, nor exactly how it spread.

I know that they keep to themselves for the most part. They fear detection in much the way that we do, but for a very different reason: the Practice involves behavior that is generally frowned upon. I've chosen to so far remain ignorant of the exact nature of the rituals involved, but the end result is almost invariably traffic with some sort of spirit or entity of an odd nature. Spirits of the departed, but not ghosts, things that embody concepts or places or things, and other creatures of power who make deals or accept payment. As such, they have only the vaguest idea of how many others engage in the Practice in their region, let alone the world.

Aside from sometimes sharing notes and working together to achieve specific goals or prevent discovery, Practitioners tend to be solitary or, at most, working in pairs. From the ones I've encountered, there is a certain level of megalomania required for someone to take up with the kinds of spirits they deal with-a degree of self-assured arrogance that they will get away unscathed. It's possible that others also get involved, but I suspect that they don't survive long.

I'd like to give you a more complete profile of an average member of this secret society, but aside from possessing those personality traits, I'm not sure if there's any common factor. Men and women are equally drawn to the power offered and from what I'm told, there isn't really an ethnic divide either. People will grab for power where they can. Technology doesn't even seem to be a barrier, as places with lower technological capabilities have less ability to police the actions of those who are part of the Practice, so while they are forced to rely

more on word-of-mouth or apprenticeship, they are consequently better hidden.

I will include more with my next report,

Arnold Lewis,

Effective Director of the Dawn

(A/N John)

Well, we're back. Updates are slower because me and Spoon both now have regular obligations that mean we don't have much time for writing. We're going to do our best, but if it weren't for the backlog of chapters I prepared in anticipation of this moment, we'd probably slow to a crawl. With luck, we'll manage to work on the weekends and maybe as I get back into the flow, I'll be able to steal some time for writing, but as it stands, updates will not be as frequent as they sometimes are.

(A/N 2 John)

Now that we've got *that* out of the way, time to discuss the chapter. This was one that was both boring to write and fun to write. In all honesty, Hari's summons weren't particularly interesting to write, and Spoon had a major hand in how Ōkong treated the dragon. On the other hand, Girl-Tobi (the basics of which were Spoon's suggestion, the details of which are mine) was a blast. She is now beginning a trend that will continue for the foreseeable future in creating chaos wherever the tournament goes.

(A/N 3 John)

Also, we have the first of what I expect will be a series of treatises on the nature of Practitioners and their peculiar brand of power. Remember them? They're playing a minor, but

significant role in the activities of the Dawn-who, in turn, will be having more of an effect as time goes on.

(A/N 4 John)

Seriously, though: Girl-Tobi was just a blast. If you're laughing about it now, I hope that next chapter will make it even more absurd.

It's Crazier Than You Thought

Chapter 86: It's Crazier Than You Thought

"Where the hell did she get it?" demanded Karkaroff. The judges were sitting in Dumbledore's office, staring at a golden egg on his desk.

"I really couldn't say, Igor." Dumbledore was prodding it with his wand. "This is certainly the fourth egg that we made. It has our signatures and the invisible rune and everything."

"How can you see an invisible rune?" asked Percy.

"So where did she get a *fifth* egg?" Maxime was in a creaking armchair, glaring at the subject of their inquiry. "Because the other champions all have theirs."

"I realize I'm a bit out of my depth here," Sasori offered. "But did you examine the egg Miss..." he seemed not to relish the words he was about to say, "Girl-Tobi acquired?"

"Hm? Oh, of course I did." Dumbledore sat back and slipped his wand into his sleeve. "And it appears to be the genuine article. It has the judges' signatures, the invisible rune, everything really."

"Are you telling me?" growled Karkaroff. "That we have *five* prizes for the *four* champions of the *Tri* wizard tournament?"

"I can't see how we can come to another conclusion, Igor. That certainly is what the facts indicate. If you have another theory, you are welcome to speculate. That *is* why we're here, discussing it instead of enjoying a rather nice, warm dinner and several cups of tea."

"You could always have food sent up," Maxime put in. "An uncultured, barbaric Briton would surely have thought of that."

"I did. But I don't allow food in this office. Crumbs are quite troublesome when constructing small, magical doodads."

"*Back to the subject at hand!*" Karkaroff looked like he was thinking of slamming his hand down on Dumbledore's desk and reconsidered. "Perhaps you cheated, Dumbledore! It's not unheard of. I'm sure Mr. Weasley could rattle off the exact precedents."

"But could he have duplicated our signatures, Igor?" Maxime asked. "I would love to blame him, but unless you can explain how that was done, that suggestion's not going anywhere."

"Might I add," said Dumbledore, "that she demonstrated that she clearly *could* have grabbed the egg, given her antics. It seems odd that I would cheat to help someone who clearly didn't need help. Though on the subject of cheating, might I ask how come your champions seemed unsurprised by the task?"

"Never mind those kinds of accusations," said Igor hurriedly.

"Far too late for that talk now," added Madam Maxime.

"I had nothing to do with it," put in Sasori.

"Well, since that's dealt with, perhaps we can deal with the other question: scoring."

"Zero!"

"Thank you, Igor, I will take that under advisement."

"Well, Albus," Maxime said slowly, "the thing is that even if, as you said, she *could* complete the task, she still didn't."

"Really? Because I seem to recall her holding a golden dragon egg at the end of the task."

"You know she didn't retrieve it properly!" This time Karkaroff did smack the desk and found himself the subject of a steady gaze.

"I'm not sure I 'know' that, Igor. To tell the truth: I am truly perplexed on the matter. But she met the requirements of the task."

"On a technicality," pointed out Maxime. "The egg she was to grab was definitely still in the clutch."

"I hate to interrupt three august personages," Percy cleared his throat. "But as the only person here who has actually *read* the rules—" Sasori coughed. "Only *wizard* here who has read the rules, perhaps I should speak? As much as the three of you are clearly enjoying your argument, it might help if I injected some facts.

"To that point: the whole argument is moot. The rules don't actually speak on the matter of task-completion-to-score requirement. It is strongly implied that success is required, but nothing outright. So everyone is pretty much free to score as they see fit.

"I'd considered pointing this out earlier, but since you all were having so much fun, I decided to wait. Now, however, I'm getting hungry."

X

X

"And now," Lee Jordan's voice boomed through the Great Hall. "We've all been eagerly awaiting the scoring for the Hogwarts champion. The judges have left their seclusion and are ready to... dig into their dinners with a gusto I've rarely seen away from my house table. Look at those utensils fly. I do believe that Dumbledore and Percy Weasley are using their forks to spar over a porkchop and yes, Karkaroff has stolen the remains of Professor Snape's veal cutlet! Madam Maxime has begun eating a whole turkey! They must have been hungry." It was at that point that Professor McGonagall got fed up and silenced Jordan.

After fifteen minutes of speedy consumption, the judges let out satisfied burps (excluding Sasori, who had been fiddling with a

launching mechanism instead of eating) and proceeded to raise their wands.

From Dumbledore's wand shot a purple '10' and the subheading 'because Igor'. From Madam Maxime's wand came a pastel '4'. From Karkaroff's wand came the shocking '0'. From Percy Weasley's wand came a bright red '10' and the subheading 'Gryffindor rocks!'. Sasori held up a '6'.

"And there you have it!" Lee Jordan shouted, although not amplified. "Girl-Tobi comes away with a thirty, taking tens from two judges! Go Hogwarts!"

X

X

The headlines in the *Prophet* were lurid. " *Massacre at Hogwarts!* " they screamed. Below were pictures of a corpse and a mutilation. The article launched into a diatribe against irresponsible dragon handlers who let their valuable charges be placed in positions where they were killed, eaten, or maimed. Two clutches of eggs had been lost, from two rare and valuable breeds. The blame, insisted the *Profit*, lay squarely on the handlers. Crackpot fool and general ne'er-do-well, Albus Dumbledore was quoted as saying that perhaps some of the blame belonged to whoever'd had the bright idea to use dragons for a task involving schoolchildren, but the evidence of death and violence was held as proof that the task was reasonable.

Each champion's task was given a summation which focused heavy praise on Girl-Tobi and Victor Krum while remaining entirely silent on Professor Potter, whose picture had gotten lost, and suggesting that the enchanting Ms. Delacour was a French tart who had seduced the dragon, but this was printed with about the standard level of invective for the *Prophet*'s view of the French, so Fleur just immolated the copy in her hands and left it at that.

An entire article was devoted to speculation on Ms. Delacour's bloodline, since no veela could destroy a dragon with her fire. Various experts had increasingly outlandish suggestions that played well on the cosmopolitan lifestyle the French were assumed to lead. In keeping with the *Profit*'s standards, the actual lurid details were kept to a minimum and it was treated about as close to an actual scientific presentation as the paper ever reached.

Teen Witch Weekly had a cover with Victor Krum holding a beaming Millie. He'd given an interview about how they had begun their whirlwind romance and that he planned to ask for her hand when she came of age. Millie received a congratulatory copy from her mother and a collection of death threats with various levels of intensity, likelihood, and fury. Hari casually zapped several letters before Millie could open them while he had a conversation with Tam. "Hexed" was all he said on the matter.

X

X

Hari blinked. "I don't recall seeing your name on the roster, Mister Krum."

Victor Krum sat beside Millie, wand at the ready. "I attend classes with Millie. I have no instructors of my own."

Hari shrugged. "I think Professor Headmaster said something about waivers. You'll need to see him about one. In the meantime, I guess I shall have to put the lesson on hold so we can evaluate your level of skill."

X

X

This time, he didn't blink. "Hello. I double-checked after the class earlier, so I know you're not on my roster."

Fleur shrugged. "I signed a waiver at lunch. It was rather comprehensive. I figure that this Tournament is no doubt going to continue to be dangerous, so best if I take steps now."

"Your command of English is improving." Hari motioned the other students to the side. "Time for an evaluation. And I can satisfy my own personal curiosity: do you have any innate resistance to fire?" His smile was all teeth.

X

X

"Professor Potter."

"Professor Headmaster."

"Did you find that your fellow competitors were somehow a threat to you?"

"No; of course not."

"Then would you care to explain why both have spent a great deal of time in Hospital over the last few days?"

"They attended classes. Skill evaluations are ongoing. I think they signed the waivers."

"Did they?" Dumbledore rifled through the paperwork on his desk. "So they did. That was most foolish of them. On a similar note, I've been getting complaints that your classes have not been instructive. Could you perhaps do the evaluations outside of the regular coursework?"

"I suppose I could. I've got a few projects that need seeing to, but aside from that, things are spinning along nicely."

"Good, good. Have a pleasant evening."

X

X

"Please! You have to help us!"

The Slytherins looked at the interlopers. They had been engaged in their usual mealtime activity of gossiping, eating, and plotting the downfall of their parents so that they could inherit the family fortune. Intruding on that normal state of affairs were a group of The Enemy (that is to say: Gryffindors) led by the twins.

The pair of Prefects glanced at each other and at Daphne, all gauging who had the honor/duty to speak first.

"Why?" asked Fleur, ignoring the entire power struggle.

"The egg!" said Gred.

"Girl-Tobi won't close it!" added Forge.

"If the two of you continue to split sentences, I will immolate this entire delegation." Fleur narrowed her eyes and one slim hand rose, cupping a white-hot flame. "Now explain."

While little other than their Professors frightened Professor Potter's students, a girl who had literally decapitated a dragon with just a bolt of fire was on the short list. There was a quiet bit of muttering as people worked out a sacrificial lamb. Eventually, Ron was shoved forwards. "It's Girl-Tobi's egg. She opened it right after the task and she hasn't shut it yet. It's unbearable! She keeps it in the Common Room and we can't sleep anymore. We've tried to silence it and everything, but nothing works and anyone who tries to move it spends the next two hours dangling from the window by his ankles. You've got to help us!"

Fleur glanced at Hari and, finding no insight there, replied with: "why?"

"Put it underwater." Krum's voice came from further down the table where he'd been having a quiet meal with his girlfriend. When Hari's one eye stared at him and Fleur actually glared, he shrugged.
"What? They need help."

"Thanks!" Ron nearly bowed to the floor. "You're the best!" He paused. "Excepting Professor Potter, of course." Fleur cleared her throat. "And the esteemed and merciful Miss Delacour?" When no fire burned him alive, he wiped sweat from his brow and beat a hasty retreat.

"You shouldn't help them."

"To quote you: 'why'?"

"Because this is a competition!"

"We're both being trained by a champion, though."

"Yeah. Do you think that's going to matter?"

"True."

Hari was apparently unaware of the exchange and went back to his meal.

X

X

"Say it bitches!" Dumbledore made a come-on motion with his hands at the other judges sitting in front of his desk. "Come on, say it!"

"No!" Igor growled at the man.

"I'm at half-mast, I *need* to hear you say *it!* "

"N-" Igore was cut off by a huge hand over his face.

"You were right, Dumbledore."

"Ahh..." Dumbledore relaxed back in his chair. "I needed that." He pointed at the copy of the *Profit* that was spread on his desk. "So nice of you to join me. I feel vindicated in knowing that we do, indeed, need more difficult tasks. Ones that, maybe, shouldn't risk valuable magical creatures, hm?"

"Do you have any ideas?" asked Sasori. "Or are you just rubbing it in their faces?"

"Mostly the rubbing thing. Say, you know Professor Potter's abilities. You should come up with a task. We're going to want more than three. It's not like we can just cancel the ones we've got in planning now ."

Sasori stroked his chin. "This will need some thinking."

"Good, good. It doesn't have to be right now. Come up with a plan for me in a week. And the rest of you should try and come up with things that we can do without needing too much more money or imports, since the Ministry will bitch and moan if we have to ignore duties and customs again. Now get out of my office, I need to clean off."

X

X

==omaKE==

Boss,

Included with my report is my next installment on the group of individuals known as 'Practitioners'.

As best as I can tell, few (if any) Practitioners are aware of the existence of magic. For all their interest in what muggles consider the occult, they are rather similar to muggle scientists; they try things to see if they work and record their findings to share with others in

exchange for their knowledge. They tend to travel in circles far from our own-though it might be more fair to say that we travel in different circles from them. We keep to ourselves. They do as well, though they have more interaction with muggle society than we do.

Magic has uneven reactions with Practitioner abilities. As an experiment, I sent Mister Gormchief, our in-house specialist, to the Leaky Cauldron. He reported that he could certainly see a rundown pub and a steady stream of people in dresses going in and out, but that he didn't feel any real desire to investigate. He wasn't able to state with certainty whether it was just that he had no interest or if an outside force was suppressing his innate curiosity as a Practitioner.

Which brings me to something that I should have stated outright earlier: Practitioners are exclusively muggle. As far as I know, there aren't any magicals who engage in the Practice and I'm reluctant to take the step of attempting it myself at the moment as it comes with a fairly high rate of failure the causes of which are only partly understood by Practitioners.

I can't say I am entirely comfortable with what I have so far discovered, but despite being a man with disturbing hobbies that even as a member of the Dawn, I at least find questionable, I will readily admit that I'm glad he's on my payroll and, therefore, inside the tent and pissing out. He has yet to display the full breadth of his capabilities, but he has been of great use on a few occasions, and the rest of the time he has been of great aid in increasing the security of the Home Office.

While he has few contacts here in England, he has also been invaluable when we have work in the contiguous colonies; he knows people in just about every major population center there and they are more than willing to do him a favor if he does one for them. Though Practitioners come from all walks of life and social levels, our man is a member of the upper crust across the Pond and his tentacles are everywhere. They aren't much use for our network, they are nevertheless a useful resource when it comes to operations. It is also thanks to him that we have what might be our most dangerous

asset, though she might better qualify as a dangerously unstable bomb.

Arnold Lewis

Effective Director of the Dawn

(A/N John)

Well, well, well. We managed to publish again. Damned if I know how we're managing that with our busy schedules. Well, my busy schedule. Spoon thinks hers is busy because she's lazier than me. Which is impressive, honestly.

(A/N 2 John)

Spoon and I managed to have dinner a couple times this week and somehow that was enough. We'll see if this continues.

(A/N 3 John)

I had truly forgotten just how awesome this chapter really is. It's truly one of the great ones. So many bits that I really loved in here. I had totally forgotten (and Spoon had apparently never noticed) that Dumbledore actually got off on that conversation.

(A/N 4 John)

If you lot are wondering, yes, that was a *Hellsing: Abridged* reference. I'm something of a big fan and so occasionally a reference will make its way in.

(A/N 5 John)

I'm more proud of the reference to *Jingo* by the late and most esteemed Terry Pratchett (mayherestinpeace). It is by far my favorite of the Discworld books and I love that particular

exchange enough that I end up using it again in another six chapters or so.

(A/N 6 John)

Also, Spoon is claiming responsibility for the *Hellsing: Abridged* reference. So yeah, that's on her if you didn't like it. Totally her fault. Not like I have total control of the keyboard or anything.

(A/N 7 John)

And damn if this isn't a lot of author's notes this time. So much to say, though. I really do adore this chapter and I hope that Girl-Tobi is becoming even more confusing a figure than she was. I'm glad to see so many people still enjoying this insanity after so long. As of this writing, 4th Year is approaching seventy-five thousand words on its own and that doesn't complete the Yule Ball. The funny thing is that I am fairly certain that is *still* less than the original book.

Off School Grounds

Chapter 87: Off School Grounds

"Does the task need to be on school grounds?"

Dumbledore looked at Sasori, wondering how the hell the young man had managed to get into his office without magic. Thankfully, years of being a schoolmaster meant that his instinctive reaction to surprise was to wandlessly cast a defensive spell, rather than how he had reacted during the War, which had involved a messy death. As such, he merely cocked his head for a moment as his brain caught up with what had been said.

"Well... as far as I know, it does. You should ask Mister Weasley about it, though."

"The rules are quiet on the matter. I made sure to read them thoroughly. This is why I'm asking. It appears that it is *assumed* that they will on on-campus, but there's no actual stipulation to that end. I think it's just that most schools don't have the option of setting up dangerous tasks outside of their grounds."

"In that case, I don't think it's necessary." Dumbledore frowned.

"Would I regret asking the reason for your question?"

"If you want deniability? Yes. I'll need access to someone who can make the devices called 'portkeys'."

"That can be arranged. I *do* need to know, in broad terms, what the task is."

Sasori smiled.

X

X

Ignor Karkaroff sat down opposite Dumbledore. "I have devised a task, Dumbledore!"

"Oh good."

"It is a flying competition!"

Dumbledore sighed and then nodded. "I am truly shocked, you know. I can't imagine how the idea came to you. Surely it has nothing to do with your champion being a world-famous quidditch player."

"If course not, Dumbledore!" Karkaroff looked affronted. "It was merely the best idea for how to fairly measure the abilities of the competitors! How could you suggest that I would devise a task intended to allow the best champion an easy victory?"

"Rather easily, Igor. Is there anything I need to know so we can prepare?"

"Well, it would be best if the competitors all had identical brooms," admitted the Durmstrang Headmaster. "Otherwise I'm sure you'll cry foul when Victor uses his top-of-the-line broom. So maybe the school could lend a few of its..." he seemed to be having trouble thinking of the right word, his face screwed up in distaste. "*Quality* models for the race?"

"I'm sure we can manage that. I was expecting much worse, really."

"Well... we might need to enchant some cameras."

"Really?"

"Yes. Oh, and it's off-campus."

Dumbledore frowned. "Is it."

"Oh yes!"

X

X

"Dumblydore! I have a task!"

"Of course you do. It's been that kind of day."

"It will require us to contact the Egyptian Ministry."

"I see."

X

X

"Professor Dumbledore!"

"Ah, I've been expecting you, Mister Weasley. Wait, before you speak, let me guess: you've devised a task."

"Well, yes-

"It no doubt plays to the strengths of the champion you favor."

"Now that you mention it-

"And it takes place off school grounds."

"How did you know?"

"I have an O Plus in Divination."

"Gosh! I didn't know they gave those!"

"That's what makes it so amazing. Perhaps you can cut to the chase and tell me what headache this will entail."

"Well, there may be some issues with Imports."

"Oh joy. I love being assailed by paperwork."

"Just wondering, Professor Dumbledore: why are we all reporting to you? Aren't you technically just another judge. I mean, if anyone is in charge, wouldn't it be the Ministry?"

"And yet here you are, reporting to me."

"I'm not *stupid*, Headmaster."

X

X

A week after the first task, Hari got a letter at breakfast. He stopped eating and opened it, checking with his Sharingan. Yes, he'd read it correctly. That was unexpected. He finished eating and then rose.
"Professor Headmaster? I need to make a short trip into London today."

"Not a problem. While you're there, would you please pick up sixteen pounds of lemon drops and another ten of assorted candies?"

The student body shivered collectively when it dawned on them that they would be studying with Professor Moody, who seemed to have something to prove.

X

X

"Arnold."

Despite the fact that he hadn't seen his boss appear, the executive director of the Dawn didn't jump. He just smiled. "Hey, Boss. Am I seeing things correctly?"

"Yep."

"Oh. Good." He faced the prospective client. "Sorry about that, but you understand my need for confirmation. Now, what seems to be

the problem you'd like sorted out?"

"My uncle. He killed my dad and took over my lands," came the squeaking reply. "I think he has my mom as his con-cue-bine, whatever that is. It sounds nice, but everyone says it isn't. So I need you to kill him and then get me in charge. My uncle's got bunches of minions, too. They're not nice at all."

Arnold didn't bother asking how someone so young heard of the Dawn. Word had a way of getting around to those who were in the right sort of need and means. That second part was what brought him to the next question. "Alright. That should be pretty easy to do, honestly. But I have to ask: what can someone like you use for payment?"

There was a moment of thoughtful silence. "You know those shiny rocks people like?"

"How shiny?"

"Like really, *really* shiny. Sometimes you can see through them! And they come out of underground."

"Diamonds?"

"Sounds right. Anyway, I know where there are a pair of those holes they come from that were abandoned."

"You're offering us two diamond mines?"

"If that's what they're called, yep."

"We'll get this sorted out in a week or so." Arnold waved to Hari as the his boss left. "Thanks, Boss!" Then he pressed a button on his desk. "Kirkbane, you're on deck. Flight down to Africa; you're taking Ms. Kedward with you." He turned to the client. "Pleasure doing business with you, Mister Simba."

X

X

All four champions sat in the Teacher's Lounge. Well, two sat. Fleur and Hari spoke quietly. Despite her rage at his 'defilement', she could hardly object now that she could incinerate a dragon's head entirely. They were discussing how to hide the tattoos, with mixed results, as Hari had worked out the optimal placement and she was less than thrilled with it. Krum stood, arm resting on the fireplace mantel, staring at the last champion with an expression of mild disbelief. After a month and a half in her presence, it wasn't truly shocking, but it was still just so strange that he had trouble coming to terms with it. In this case 'it' was the fact that Girl-Tobi had managed to get her hands on a dessert and was now bouncing around the room with her feet firmly side-by-side for reasons known only to her. She was doing this while jumping a pair of long ropes she had conjured and was animating to create a double-dutch pattern.

The judges filed into the room. "With the addition of another champion," Dumbledore said, "we've decided to add some more tasks. As a result of this, each of the other judges devised a new task which is certainly in no way related to the strengths of his or her champion. For this purpose, I turn the floor over to Mister of-the-Red-Sands."

"Thank you." Sasori settled himself into a crouch. "This is a task that will be ongoing for the remainder of the Tournament and stresses stealth, subtlety, and intelligence. Tomorrow morning, you will each receive a letter with a clue. This will lead you to your next clue and so on. The clues will eventually lead you to what you are to retrieve and bring to me. There will be a series of objectives over the course of the Tournament. Sometimes you will be in competition for one prize, sometimes it becomes a matter of getting yours first. Is that understood?" With four nods, he went on. "Should the target's absence be noticed, that will be marked as a failure, so discretion is essential.

"This will be taking place exclusively off of Hogwarts grounds, so keep in mind that you will need to spend a good deal of time away

from the school. While this might cause your schooling to suffer, it will certainly ensure a strong grounding in practical lessons that are more valuable than academics anyway.

"Oh yes, Professor Dumbledore asked me to remind you that you are not permitted to sabotage one another excepting when you are in direct competition. I think that covers the important parts. The rest will be for you to work out. I will be watching."

When the judges had left, Fleur turned to Hari. " *Subtlety and stealth* ? How does that describe you at all?"

Hari shrugged. "You didn't catch me tattooing you."

X

X

"Why are we way out in the forest, Uncle Sasori?"

"Because it's important to meet your summons."

"I got that part."

"And your boss is huge."

"About that..."

"Don't even try to tell me that Ōkong isn't a boss."

"No, no. He is." Hari looked rather sheepish.

"Then what?"

"Well, it's a bit complicated."

"I don't have anywhere to be today."

"So, have you ever looked at a contract? I mean more than just checking the signatures or the type at the top?" When Sasori shook his head, Hari continued, "well I did. A lot. They're really complicated. And if you know how to read them, they specify each and every entity that can be summoned by the signatory. Sort of. It's all pretty abstract, but when dad's crows have a new chick, the contract needs to be slightly modified to add the new crow to the set."

"Alright. That makes sense."

"Well, that means that when I made my own contract, I had to put in each of the beings I could summon, right? So I did one of those chakra-potency test things while I was home and I was pretty much off the charts. The Curse Seal means I'm constantly running at full and using Nature chakra at that. So..."

"I'm not sure where you're going with this."

"Maybe I should just show you." Hari bit his thumb and slammed his hand down on the ground. The forest disappeared in a cloud.

Sasori looked up when the smoke had dissipated. "What in the name of all the blessed gods did you do, Hari?"

Surrounding them were six figures, each gargantuan in size. One was Ōkong, who looked around and seemed mildly disappointed that there wasn't another dragon to eat.

There was also what could best be described as a mound of hair with armor. Careful observation would reveal that it was quadrupedal, but that was almost completely obscured first by a layer of thick, shaggy fur that dangled all the way to the ground, and more thoroughly by segmented layers of metal plates that covered nearly the entire thing with just the occasional bit of hair poking out from a joint. From what must be its head extended a long protuberance with its own flexible armored layers and a pair of giant

tusks. Gleaming out of holes in the head-armor, were a pair of coal-red orbs.

Beside that was a form that stood taller than the others, wearing a similar set of armor to Ōkong, though it didn't wear a hat. Coming off the ursine head was a massive topknot of coarse, brown hair which also covered the arms under its bracers. The pair of swords at its side was complimented with a huge bow on its back and a set of arrows on its left hip.

Next was a huge, avian form, as best as could be seen under scalemail. It had a set of blades over the leading edges of its wings, which had some sort of heavy cloth with metal-ribbed reinforcements. Green eyes with slotted pupils stared out from under a metallic helm and the caw it loosed was enough to send the remaining acromantula running.

Then came the third of the armored sword-wielders. This one had a long tail that slipped out from under its armored waist-plates with black, pebbled hide. Both feet were uncovered, allowing long, dexterous digits to flex on the forest floor. Similarly long fingers flexed on its hands. Blue eyes stared out of a coldly reptilian face that had far too many teeth.

Finally, a giant, brown-furred being wearing comparatively simple garb. It had on just a pair of loose pants and a gi. A short, narrow head swiveled around, examining the surroundings. What drew the eye, though, were the enormous claws extending from its paws.

"Greetings, my Lord," intoned Ōkong. "Let me introduce my fellows to your lordship." He pointed a finger at the armored mound. "This is Ōvata." It made a motion that might have been a bow. "Ōmuri," the ursine figure clasped its paws in front of its chest and bowed. "Ōziz," the bird cawed again, spitting fire into the air. "Ōjira," the reptile gave a half-bow. "And Omapi." The last gave a deep bow.

"I might have made a contract with just six bosses."

X

X

==omaKe==

Gamabunta stared up in shock at the armored ape who somehow managed to be taller than him. Finding that there was someone physically larger was bad enough, but the giant was accompanied by another five equally imposing figures. Still, he was the boss Toad for a reason. One hand went to the hilt of his blade. "Who the fuck are you lot?" Despite the volume his accent was distinct and rough, sounding about as close to a street thug of Osaka as he could without speaking Japanese.

It was especially glaring when considered against the cultured words of the ape. "This one apologizes most strongly for our unwonted visit," it wasn't just that he sounded more educated and polished, his words had an archaic ring to them that spoke of ancient formality. One large hand reached out and took hold of the giant lizard's wrist. "Peace, Ōjira."

"Fuck that noise," the lizard's growl was closer to Gamabunta's diction. The words were crude, though the accent was more of a farmer than a street tough. "He's rude."

Gamabunta took a couple steps back. Not out of fear, and he felt it showed intelligence on his part; by doing so, he kept the sextet in his field of vision and, more importantly, at angles he could strike. That wasn't to say he didn't feel mildly intimidated, but he was the boss and he wouldn't let fear rule him.

"Nevertheless." The ursine warrior sporting the topknot stepped closer to Ōjira and laid a massive paw on its shoulder. "We arrived without warning. We are stronger than rudeness." If the ape sounded cultured, this one sounded outright posh-country gentry to the ape's urbanity. "Apologies..." when Bunta didn't respond, the bear sighed. "Your name, please?"

"You first." Both ape and bear gripped the lizard tightly.

"Apologies on apologies. This one is Ōkong."

"Gamabunta. Why're you here?"

"We are..." the bear paused. "New around here? Or perhaps returning after a long rest."

The thing that looked like a mound of hair and armor rumbled something that Bunta was eventually able to decide had been 'yo', but it was hard to tell. Even compared to the bass voices of any boss, it was a deep sound that was almost below audible range.

"You lookin' for a rumble?" Bunta remained on edge. They hadn't done anything overtly threatening, but they were bigger than he was and half wore multiple swords-the others just came with weapons built in.

"Merely being good neighbors," the bear replied calmly as Ōkong managed to get a good grip on Ōjira and began to drag him away. "Next time, we shall send word we intend to visit, we merely wished to meet our new neighbors." The four others turned and left.

"The fuck just happened?" muttered Bunta.

(A/N John)

So yeah, as you can tell, writing has slowed considerably. We have less time to write and have been consumed by another project that has been just too interesting to plan out for us not to work on it. I have a collection of chapters prepared, so aside from writing up some omake, we should be able to get something out on at least a slightly regular basis for a while.

(A/N 2 John)

As to the other project, assuming we finish it, it's the kind of thing that makes *Now Die!* look warm and cuddly. So yeah, we run the spectrum from crack to dark.

(A/N 3 John)

Back on the subject of writing speed: Spoon and I barely have time for each other these days, let alone write. Dinner a couple times a week is just about the limit. So that's a thing.

(A/N 4 John)

Still, I hope you lot are still amused by this fic. We're coming up on two years of *Itachi* now, so it's crazy for us to look back and realize how long it's been and how much has changed since we started this fic. I suspect that there will be more retrospective during a release in November.

(A/N 5 John)

Also, whoever got us a TVTropes page: thanks! You have no idea how awesome that is for us to have that. I've been hoping for a while that we'd get that promotion in badass. I cannot help bragging a bit. Woo!

(A/N 1 Spoon)

Also we checked. Lion King came out in 1994. So it totally works.

Omake

Chapter 88: OMAKE

"Miss Granger." Despite his inclination towards stealth, Sasori had made sure to be thoroughly audible in his approach of the young woman. According to Hari, she was his first student in 'proper' magic; when that was combined with training under his nephew for several years, he assumed that her reaction to being startled would be with violence and while he was unlikely to end up having a problem there, it was still easier to avoid it.

She turned around. With Hari teaching so much, she now had several classes she had to walk alone between. Any normal young woman would be worried about being alone in a deserted hallway surrounded by a school full of hormonal teenagers. Hermione was a student of Professor Potter and so would be willing to eviscerate anyone so terminally stupid. Besides, everyone here was *also* a student of Professor Potter and knew how he felt about that kind of behavior.

"Yes, Mister... uh."

"Sasori will do. I just have an accolade, no surname."

"Right. What can I do for you, Mr. Sasori?" With her hesitation gone, she reverted to the less formal, less pronounced version of the prefix.

"I require your help."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I need to understand how to use what I believe is called a 'train'."

X

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Arnold Lewis walked into his office and immediately drew his wand. There was someone in the stacks other than his staff. They wouldn't be downstairs from their rooms for another hour yet. In the file room was a young man with red hair.

"Who the fuck are you?" snapped Arnold, silently flinging a binding hex. When the figure dodged, it drew his eye to the cloak over his shoulders. "And you must be some kind of idiot to break in here pretending to be a member of the Dawn." He snapped his wand down, launching a series of non-lethal curses-Professor Potter was usually of the opinion that killing was the only valid option, but he had reviewed the need to capture persons of interest. This bastard definitely qualified.

"Pretending?' I assure you, I am not." Arnold was forced to duck out of the way of a trio of knives that flicked out from under the sleeves of his cloak. "Perhaps I should introduce myself? My name is-" he deflected a conjured chain with a knife-"Sasori of the Red Sand."

Arnold stopped in the middle of another spell. "Oh. That's different." He tucked his wand away. "You look much younger than I expected." The odds of anyone threatening knowing who Professor Potter's relatives were was remarkably low. He paused. "It's so cool to meet you, you know. I've been managing our intelligence network pretty much on my own these days. That's on top of running the office, so I'm sure I'm missing things. Could you, maybe, take a look and let me know what you think?"

Sasori gestured to the cabinet he'd been going through. "That's what I was doing."

"Oh, yeah. I guess you could do that. But using the computer is so much easier."

The redhead paused. "I don't think I know how to do that."

"Come on, you can use mine." Arnold was already conjuring a chair beside his at his desk. "We've got a lot of agents, so I have three people helping by taking the incoming data and sorting it so I at least have it in some kind of order when I try to work it out."

Sasori (with a lot of help) opened the list of active agents. If he'd been able to, he would have blanched. Hari had managed to establish a network larger than his own in only a few years! He didn't know what all the titles and notes next to the names meant (something he'd be discussing with the young man who apparently ran the whole operation), but even if half of them were worthless, it was still huge for so little time.

"Impressive." His voice was calm thanks to being entirely artificial. "I can see why it takes you some time."

"I've got nothing on the schedule this morning, so barring a walk-in, I can take the time and show you how to use one of the computers in the stacks."

Sasori's smile was hungry. "Alright."

X

X

It was a couple hours later that the Boss's phoenix flared into being in front of Arnold and dropped a letter on the keyboard he and Sasori were working over. Sasori chuckled to himself as he saw the Hogwarts seal on it.

"Well, well. It appears my nephew may be maturing a little after all."

"Hm?"

"He's smart enough to delegate to you."

"Do you mind if I open it?"

"Go ahead. I'll finish going through the current reports from the London PD."

Arnold skimmed the contents, then reread them several times. "Well then." He frowned and then considered his possible options and shuddered. There really was only one team he could send on this, whether it required pulling them from the duty roster or not. First, though, he'd get the three in the stacks to make sure he sent the pair to the right place. "Michaelson!"

A young man in crisp slacks and a button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up materialized from the depths of the stacks. "Yes?" He had a distinctly put-together look that suggested he came out of a muggle university rather than magical education. He also clearly didn't have a wand. Arnold hadn't even considered objecting to hiring people who knew how to use a computer for this job, especially since one of them had a degree in library science (who knew that people got special training to be librarians?).

"This is top priority. Get the details sorted out and then pass the marching orders to Kirkbane. Tell Mathews vacation is called early and he's headed to Africa to relieve Kirkbane."

"Got it." The man disappeared into the shadows that defied the lights overhead.

"Sorry about that, Mister Sasori. But when the Boss sends me something directly..."

"I understand. You'll want to work quickly-that might just be a timed... task ."

X

X

"Isaac," huffed the partly transparent spirit. "We've cleansed the place completely. Why are we still here?"

"Because we're supposed to have him on the throne."

She looked at the stone the cub sat on. "Close enough. I want to get out of here."

"He's not really fit to rule..."

Arms crossed under an ample bust. "So what?"

"So I think we should make sure to deal with it."

An vulture winged down to land so that Isaac was between it and the woman. "Huh." He opened the envelope on its leg. "Looks like we're being recalled early."

"Thank the creatures from beyond!"

He scribbled a few quick lines on the back of the letter and handed it to the vulture. "There. Now it's the problem of whoever covers for us."

X

X

"Now, you'll see that the behavior of the spotted hyena is..." the professor trailed off, seeing two young men standing at the door of his classroom.

"Professor Niles George?"

"Y-yes?" They weren't very old or very broad and were wearing jeans and t-shirts, but there was something vaguely menacing about them nevertheless.

"You need to come with us."

Professor George had always wanted to believe that he was the kind of person who, when the situation called for it, would fight back

rather than allow someone to do horrible things to him. It wasn't any fun to learn that he'd been wrong and he was the type who would quietly acquiesce in the hopes that it wouldn't end badly. His class, in turn, were watching with confusion. The two couldn't be any older than them, possibly younger, even, but they weren't very safe.

He really hoped this wasn't the last anyone would see him alive.

X

X

"Hello, Professor Dieter." The voice wasn't cruel, or even not-kind. In fact, it was nearly friendly. However it was next to his ear while he was in his bed. And he lived alone. "Terribly sorry to wake you, but you have to come with me."

"What?" He sat up to see three people in his room. Two of them were the age of university students. The third had the tweedy look of someone who spent his life in study. "What's going on."

"This is a kidnapping."

He wasn't sure what there was to say after that.

X

X

"You know," said Professor Dieter to the man who'd been introduced as Professor George. "When they said they were kidnapping me, I rather expected to be shoved in the boot of a car and then taken to some horrible building in Limehouse or Whitechapel. This... not so much."

Professor George looked around the spacious cabin of the private jet they'd been escorted to by their captors. It had been a comfortable drive in the SUV to the airport and then this. There was even alcohol.

He had to agree, when he was kidnapped, he'd been fearing the worst. Now, though, he was just confused.

X

X

A two hour drive through some of the most untamed country Professor George had ever seen was actually something of a delight. He'd never had the chance to travel to the parts of the globe he specialized in. But on the other hand, this was nowhere near anything resembling civilization-the plane had landed in a field of brush, for goodness's sake! As such, he just had to ask. "Uh... not to be rude, gentlemen," it was always wise to be polite to kidnappers, "but can I ask where we are or going, preferably both?"

"Well," said the shorter of the two. "I couldn't tell you exactly where, but we're definitely in Africa. We're headed to our client's home."

"Someone *lives* out here?" demanded Professor Dieter.

X

X

"So... where's this client?" Despite the length of the drive, it had been remarkably smooth. The terrain must have been a lot less irregular than it looked. Professor George was staring at the cutest lion cub he'd ever seen. Right up until it opened its mouth.

"I'm right here, mister!"

"GAH!" The two professors jumped in shock-neither noticed their kidnappers being slightly surprised as well. "Holy shit! A talking lion!"

"Hey! I don't make remarks about a talking human!"

"So, profs, you two are here to teach this young lad how to rule."

"We're what?"

X

X

"So, can you tell me the area of your domain?" asked Professor Dieter.

"Everything the light touches, my dad said!" came the chipper reply.

This was going to be an uphill struggle.

X

X

"When you get older, you're going to want to mate with all the females in your pride," Professor George said.

"Ick! Why? That's what moms and dads do!"

"Yes. Well, sooner or later, you're going to want to be a dad yourself."

"If I have to..." the cub looked rather unhappy. "I guess Nala isn't so bad, for a girl."

"About that... you're not going to want to mate with just Nala; it'll be *all* of the females. You shouldn't worry about that. It's perfectly natural. It's also okay if you decide to kill any male lion who comes into your territory."

"Hey! I've been trying to teach him how to be diplomatic!" Professor Dieter seemed rather put out over this new revelation.

"Dad never killed anyone. Neither did his dad." Simba paused.
"Uncle Scar did, but he was mean; dad *should* have killed him!"

Dieter sighed. It was true that sometimes people needed killing. And, well, he was a lion. Lions had to kill to eat as any carnivore did. But at least the kid was listening to the ideas of how taxation worked.

X

X

"Simba," Professor George said carefully, "you said your father ran *this* pride?"

"Yup! Just like his dad did! And my dad's dad's dad, too!"

The professor sat down heavily on a rock. "That's fucked up. That means Nala is at best, your cousin by Scar and at worst, your sister. It depends on who her mom was. There were only two males in the pride." He rubbed his face with a hand. "You... this isn't... how come there aren't other cubs around? Clearly inbreeding isn't an issue around here, but without more cubs..."

"The other lionesses are no good, prof?" asked one of the young men.

"Aside from the fact that they're his aunts? They're reaching the end of their fertility. All he'll have are immature cubs assuming that he matures fast enough to make use of their remaining time. That's no good."

"So he needs birds his own age?"

"Pretty much."

"Not a problem. Hey, Simba, you know of anything else valuable around here?"

X

X

Arnold opened the invoice and blinked. Why on earth... he glanced at the morning's paper. Well... that explained " *Mysterious Kidnappings: Lioness Cubs Vanish From Zoos Across World!* " There was going to have to be a *really* good explanation for this one.

(A/N John)

So, in breaking with my usual habit as has been the case pretty much for the last... I don't know how many chapters, I'm not including an omake with this chapter. However, this is not so much because I don't have any ideas, but rather that this chapter really is a giant omake. Those of you who wanted to know more about Simba's case, we had already written this and now present it to you. This chapter should answer those who'd been unsure if Simba remained a lion cub-yes. That's why Arnold wanted a consultation to make sure he wasn't crazy.

(A/N 2 John)

Our update rate has dropped far below even my worst projections as a result of an uptick in the lack of time Spoon and I have together to write and a commensurate increase in the amount of work I'm doing.

(A/N 3 John)

It doesn't help that we've also been working on two side projects (that is to say: "fics that will undoubtably be longer than one-shots, but not reaching *Itachi*'s lengths.") which have distracted us for a good bit of what writing time we've managed to snatch.

(A/N 4 John)

Which leads me to the inevitable question. I asked in *Strings*, but I am aware that this fic has a great deal more of our readership than that one. Would people rather wait longer for

updates, or would you guys like to see what we have of the two other fics we're working on. We've got a crackfic and a crackedfic in the works. They amuse me.

(A/N 5 John)

Still, it's good to be back to *Itachi*. The past couple days are the first time I've done any work on it for a couple weeks. I'm probably going to try and focus on it a bit more for a while so we can keep publishing. We have things planned for the year.

You WILL Have Fun, Citizen

Chapter 89: You *WILL* Have Fun, Citizen

"Good morning, stupids!" Dumbledore paused for a moment, his mouth moving silently. "I do believe that came out right. It is my great pleasure to announce that this year, for reasons, we are holding a Yule Ball!" There was confused silence. "The Yule Ball is a fancy dance you are obligated to attend if you are in Fourth Year or older. *With a date*. Persons attending stag or doe will find that remains their permanent state of relationship.

"In keeping with the name, it will be held the night of the winter solstice, which should give you almost two weeks to prepare. I'm sure that Hogsmead has not raised the prices on dress robes in response to your inability to go to London to buy them. But if they have, then it's your fault for not knowing in advance that you would need them.

"I reiterate: you *will* have a date or forfeit dating for the remainder of your sorry time on this earth.

"Alcohol is strictly forbidden at this event. I will thank Messrs Weasley to please hide the booze they sneak into the punch. Since you will all be stone cold drunk, I want to leave you with a thought that should keep you nicely aware of yourself: should anyone manage to engage in some impregnating activities, the brief period left for your life will be spent in the most horrific experiences I can concoct with all the deviousness of a man who has a dungeon in his house."

After that, breakfast resumed with its usual vigor.

X

X

There was an undercurrent of concern throughout the castle. Boys were asking girls out desperately, trying to make sure they didn't suffer whatever punishment Dumbledore decided to inflict. Several secret couples were having to make plans to change that status. The number of injuries in Professor Potter's classes rose dramatically as distracted students failed to dodge properly and then received a second wound for their fuck up (the Professor's words).

"Hari." Fleur was once again sitting beside him. She had a high tolerance for the strangeness that surrounded him. "As odd as it is for me to be doing this, and although I'm sure of your answer, would you go to the Yule Ball with me?"

"Nope. I've got a date."

Fleur grinned (several boys were suddenly very distracted). "Impressive. How'd you manage to get a date in two days?" She didn't look up at the young men who had begun to surround her. "No, I won't go with any of you pathetic wastes of sperm. If you don't go away, I will crisp the lot of you."

"I wrote a letter. It was pretty easy, honestly."

The rest of the table was less shocked by the interaction. Fleur had taken to trying to get rejected by Hari on occasion because she enjoyed the novel experience. He'd begun to take it in stride. Compared to his Uncles, this was nothing. And as he'd told her, she was very pretty, but not enough to lose his mind over. He also reminded her that he was able to say this despite having seen her nude and actually touched her body to tattoo her. That part usually left her a bit livid, but impressed all the same.

"Well then, this is a little more difficult."

"You're right," said Krum (who seemed to have a highly developed death-wish), "after all, who'd want to go with your skinny ass?" Millie pulled him out of the way of the fireball that set part of the Hufflepuff table on fire.

"Mister Krum, I understand that you a guest in my castle, but I must nevertheless insist that you try to minimize your attempts to provoke Mademoiselle Delacour. It's damaging my stuff." Dumbledore hadn't looked up during the exchange, but the sound of air igniting was distinctive and few people in the castle, even with Professor Potter's instruction, were as quick to anger and as quick to fiery violence as the French witch. The Hufflepuffs were busily containing the blaze that had consumed half the giant table and was now making a spirited go of melting through the floor. Girl-Tobi contributed by pulling marshmallows from somewhere and roasting them.

"Have either of you made any progress on Mister Sasori's task?" Krum asked when Fleur had stopped holding fire in her hands.

"Yep."

"I have had some success."

"Huh." Krum didn't comment on the fact that neither had left the school.

Hari had skimmed the *Times* in Hermione's hands and picked up the hints that someone in his office had been at work. A minor pickpocketing incident in King's Cross with unspecified losses and a series of random break-ins at a couple of upscale hotels. Those had been responses to the first clue. After this, though, he had no idea what to look for. Most of it wouldn't even make the papers.

X

X

Hogsmead was remarkably understanding about the need for dress robes and only tripled their prices, knowing that students of Professor Hari tended (mostly) to be rather law-abiding. There were the outliers, of course, but stealing dress robes was a messy affair because few of those students also had any talent at the kind of detailed charmwork needed to modify them to fit properly. It was a

rather basic anti-theft method that all smart magical tailors used: they never made self-fitting or otherwise altering clothing and jealously guarded their techniques for customizing the cloth. Between that and making it a point to never alter one another's clothing to keep everyone honest, merchandise tended to stay where it was supposed to.

That didn't mean that it was a peaceful town during the only weekend students were allowed there before the ball. It was a week before they had to have dates and people were scrambling to secure last-minute company. The only saving grace was that since everyone needed a date, everyone was pretty much certain to *get* a date. The question was with whom. There was also a good deal of vicious fighting to see who got first pick of the dress-robés, with several prompt duels breaking out in the middle of the town (officiated by the Head Girl, who corralled other students and generally made sure that there weren't injured bystanders) that sent a few students to the hospital wing in mortal terror of what Professor Potter was going to do to punish them.

The Third Years bought candy and watched the chaos with every sign of enjoyment. The smarter ones were taking note of techniques used by their upperclassmen because Professor Potter was very big on self-improvement. More than one placed bets that Draco Malfoy (having secured a date with Tracy via the most ancient and strange of methods: asking nicely) was handling with the aplomb of someone who'd been raised to see profit everywhere and the skill of avoiding danger that being around Professor Hari had instilled.

Girl-Tobi, being the only Third Year who needed to attend the ball, had acquired dress-robés from somewhere during the previous week. To keep herself occupied, she had grabbed a set of the nicest dress robes from a shop and proceeded to run off down the street with them, chased by a group of irate would-be buyers and cackling as she dodged their spellfire. That she replied with only prank spells was far from kind and in her wake was a trail of thoroughly tickled, leglocked, jelly-legged, and stung students.

The brothers Weasley, aware of their horrid robes (courtesy of their well-meaning mother) were on the prowl for bargain options and had begun contemplating going in school robes since they were a nice, plain black at least. For some reason, their mother (despite having their exact coloration) persisted in buying maroon clothing for them. At one time, they would have consulted with their little sister, but since her possession, Tam's ability to judge matters like this had pretty much vanished and she rarely wore anything but simple blacks, whites, and grays. Their dates (Ron was still looking for his, but there was a good chance he'd find *someone* in time since everyone had to) had been of some assistance in the matter and accompanied them on the expedition, declaring that none of the robes they could reasonably afford were worth the price.

Tam herself, being a theoretical Third Year (according to any official documentation, at least), wasn't invited to the Ball, so had a great deal of amusement at the antics of the upperclassmen. She did take the time to send an anonymous letter via owl from Hogsmeade.

Professor Potter was nominally acting a chaperone for the students; in practice, that meant that he reminded them not to break any rules and then disappeared in a cloud of fire. It wasn't a long trip, but he'd needed to get some supplies for a last-minute project, do a bit of research, and get a gift for someone who'd turned up rather unexpectedly—he didn't have time to make something on such short notice. After that, he walked the streets, deducting points from anyone who hadn't escaped from Girl-Tobi's various hexes and admonishing both sides of the ongoing duel for their failures.

The people of the village weren't terribly thrilled about the fact that the escort wasn't doing anything to stop the eruption of violence that was filling their streets, but were also aware that this was Professor Potter, and decided that him not ordering their homes burned to the ground was about as good as they were going to get. Besides, several students who secured robes had begun to help protect buildings and repair damage done during the festivities. The rare

merchant willing to brave the streets made a good profit refreshing the concessions of the audience for the various fights.

It occurred to Hari that evening that he could have just mailed a request to Arnold and had all the things he'd done that day dealt with, but there was something satisfying about going out into the field. Besides, he was still getting used to having people to handle problems for him-the fact that he'd turned over Uncle Sasori's task had been more a function of needing to be in the castle to teach than anything. He'd considered sending clones out, but they had limited lifetimes and this was a series of missions with unknown durations. He needed to stop by the office come summer, though, so he could get caught up on what all was happening. His young lieutenant seemed to be a resourceful administrator, but the reports he was getting showed that his organization had expanded beyond his personal hires and it might be wise to meet the new employees.

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"Well, we've come to the day of reckoning," was how Dumbledore's morning address began. "It's tonight that we find out if everyone made sure to have a date. I'm rather torn, really, because I almost want someone to be stupid enough to give me a reason to inflict punishments, but that would come at the cost of someone making me look bad. On the whole of it, I think it best if you obey me.

"Classes will be ending at noon today so that those of you who are of a female persuasion can take the truly epic lengths of time you require for primping and powdering and whatever else it is you do. All males who are attending the Ball are to take that time to report to Madam Pomfrey for contraceptive potions to make absolutely sure that the punch that will be *alcohol free* does not result in intoxicated impregnations.

"The doors to the Great Hall will open at precisely six in the evening. I expect that all of you will want to be waiting for that momentous

event because the idea of 'fashionably late' is one that I never, personally, encountered and tardiness is rather insulting towards me, something I'm sure you all wish to avoid at the risk of being dangled by your thumbs from the Astronomy Tower. Thank you."

X

X

==omAkE==

Arnold looked over his spreadsheets. If muggles had one thing to be said for them, it would be the ability to keep track of data without having to make a new spell each time. In this case, it was the subscription lists for the various newsletters published by the Dawn. He'd broken the country down into districts based on the muggle parliamentary districts and separate sheets for government offices. As distance from Britain grew, so did the breadth of the 'district'. At least until he had a chance to spread agents more thoroughly on the Continent and beyond.

The readership of their distribution was remarkably sparse. This was partly because the Dawn did not advertise the service per se-he'd simply decided that it was easier to prepare the things monthly to send to those who were paying them for regular reports. The other reason was that Arnold, despite being the effective boss of a group of nearly amoral killers, thieves, and kidnappers, was not stupid enough to give the kinds of information the Dawn collected to just anyone. Before anyone was allowed to subscribe, they were subjected to a week-long investigation by the Dawn to make sure that it wouldn't end badly.

Of course, the price was also exorbitant. Those who paid on a per-issue basis were pretty safe, but those who were on a monthly subscription and missed their payments... well, they'd been publishing them for a little while now and a couple of people had managed to be that stupid or careless. The vetting process was

mostly about whether the person could be safely given the information-not that the Dawn shared everything that they got.

The ones who hadn't paid... well, the Dawn sent a few agents to collect. And interest. And one hadn't had enough for that. Arnold had needed to find a way to make up that loss, so he'd had the man rendered for potions ingredients. His potion maker turned the results into organ regrowth potions-potions with truly insane prices because they were highly illegal to make in Britain and most of the Western world (and good bits of the rest of it as well. Pretty much anywhere that tried to put value on the life of humans).

Still, despite having a number of monthly subscribers he could count on his fingers, they were highly profitable and required no agents to do anything other than what he had them doing anyway. As far as Arnold was concerned, this was essentially free money. It would surprise many who'd been cleared for subscribing and who hadn't. And then there was the boss's project. It was keeping his top team out of play for an unspecified length of time without bringing in money. If the company weren't making truly absurd amounts of money, that would have been an issue. It was frustrating, though. Kedway was pretty much a panacea for any matter he was presented with.

He still wasn't sure what that little doll was for. He knew he'd end up having to find out at some point, but he wished to prolong his ignorance. Still, it was time for another talk with Gormchief so he could learn a bit more about the people he was now hiring in small numbers to engage in research under the man's instruction and occasionally go out and solve a problem or two.

(A/N John)

So we're publishing again. This is cool. That first sentence was, some of our jokes have been, based on an accident of typing that we decided to keep. I'd meant to type "students" after all.

(A/N 2 John)

We're going to be putting up a poll for about a week. I'm leaving the exact details to Spoon, so if it doesn't get set up promptly or anything, that's on her. We've had mixed feelings from our readers on seeing the various other fics we're writing.

(A/N 3 John)

Not sure what else to put in here. It's been a long time since I actually wrote this chapter. My mind is on later events.

(A/N 4 John)

And over dinner, we decided what the gift was. Chaos is coming.

Hari's Date Is

Chapter 90: Hari's Date Is...

The staff hadn't been idle during the time allotted to students for preparations. With the exception of Professor Potter, whose skill wasn't in doubt, but who none of the staff wished to involve for fear he'd try to help, they had been hard at work setting up the Great Hall. Gone were the normal tables, replaced with dozens of smaller tables, able to sit two, and a handful of tables that groups of friends could commandeer. A platform had been set up to one side, draped with bunting on which a series of instruments were being tuned by their owners. The Weird Sisters had been unable to perform due to 'pressing engagements', but Dumbledore had managed to book a rising band Wandirection. The three bagpipers were engaged in a spirited war behind the silencing charms to see who could be on-key the loudest; they used somewhat old-fashioned versions, with pipes taller than they were and supported by magic. The drummer had replaced the heads of his drums for the event and was carefully adjusting their tension via the time-honored technique of grabbing a roadie by the hair and smacking his face against the skin in question. The six violinists were actually fighting a duel over the first chair and ignoring the pair of cellists who were trying to get them to sit down and actually prepare for the gig. There had been some struggle to move the massive organ into the hall. Hundreds of pipes stretched up to the enchanted ceiling, each one labeled with increasingly unusual titles ('b', 'g-flat', 'y-sharp', 'male voice', 'castrati', 'laugh-track', 'car accident', and so on). The organist was limbering up, stretching his fingers and placing them over the vast banks of keys that surrounded him completely to the point that he was entirely hidden from view.

Professor McGonagall had confided in Dumbledore that she'd received an unsigned letter asking her to the ball. Her first instinct had been to go neuter Sirius Black, but since the phrasing had been polite, she assumed it couldn't be him. She was more than a little

surprised at it, actually. Despite her... physical attributes, she had managed to quell any and all interest in her taking the roll of Mrs. Robinson until now. At this point, she mostly wanted to know which of her students had written so charming a note.

The castle was abuzz with excitement-people wanted to know whom Professor Potter had brought as a date. Students had met their dates and slipped into the Hall to take their seats. The champions were supposed to make a grand entrance after everyone was present, so they were gathered in an alcove off to the side to wait for their cue, being overseen by McGonagall, who was spending most of her time being incredibly surprised by the pairs in front of her.

Virtually every male student had to stop for a moment when they saw the deputy headmistress.

In honor of it being a dance, she had done her best to dress formally, but there was only so much she could do with the enchantments in effect. At least she'd been able to give the house colors an airing. The fact that she was becoming somewhat used to this was worrying.

Her hair hung loose, which at least covered some of her back. She hadn't been able to get it down to a full dress. She wore what could be considered slightly more covering than a bra made of dark red fabric with gold lace edging that had tiny lions worked into the pattern. It had been a consistent problem that, with the exception of certain blouses, she was unable to cover her midriff, so it was, once again, bared. The only bright spot there was that she was somehow still warm, despite the freezing temperatures around her. Her skirt was probably the worst part, though; it was so low on her hips that she'd had to forego underwear to not have it peeking out over the waist-that had been bad enough, but while the fabric swept the floor in its length, it was slit up the front almost all the way so that it billowed around her, looking more like a cape than proper clothing and showing a lot of leg and feet in red heels. She wasn't sure how she'd managed it, but the slice up the front was just enough that she

wasn't flashing anyone as long as she kept her legs crossed while sitting.

McGonagall hadn't been surprised to find Millicent Bulstrode was attending the Ball with Krum. She had managed to find a dress that was, if not flattering (Professor McGonagall tried not to think badly of her students, but she had to admit that young Miss Bulstrode was not gifted with great beauty), then at least was acceptable and wouldn't have people throwing things.

On the other hand, she had certainly not expected Mademoiselle Delacour to attend with Miss Girl-Tobi on her arm. The young girl was wearing a black dress that was appropriately conservative for her age, though the black with red clouds was more than a little worrying. The French champion, wore an even more conservative outfit, denying all the British beliefs about French women (or just covering all tattooed skin).

Professor Potter stood alone.

"Mister Potter," she said quietly. "We are coming to the time when the champions must enter the Ball. Where is your date?"

"She said something about finishing touches to her makeup. She hadn't been wearing any when we met up, so I don't see why she'd want some now." He shrugged. "I don't claim to understand how females deal with formal occasions; my aunt never went to them."

"Well, she needs to be here soon."

Then a voice spoke from behind her. "Well, well, Minerva. Look at you all sluttied up for the dance."

McGonagall's face went from stern to stony in an instant. The black tail that had been curled around her thigh bristled and the ears on the top of her head flattened back into her hair. She slowly turned to face the source of the insult. "*Circe*," her tone was sickly sweet behind gritted teeth. "*How... nice to see you . Nyah.*" The last sound

out of her mouth made her expression grow positively feral for a second before smoothing into the icy politeness of a woman talking to someone who'd picked on her throughout her school years.

"Isn't it just?" The woman smiled broadly, ignoring the obvious warning signs with either blithe stupidity or supreme confidence. "I wasn't expecting to see so... *much* of you, though, Minerva."

McGonagall inhaled a hissing breath.

"And your..." she waved her hands to encompass McGonagall's body. "Such a vain thing, aren't you Minerva? Were you aging so badly that you had to retreat behind your youth?"

"What are you doing here?" McGonagall nearly growled.

"Didn't you know?" Circe laid a hand on Hari's forearm. "I'm his date."

McGonagall winced as her claws extended into her balled up fists.

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"Presenting..." Lee Jordan had somehow taken it upon himself to introduce the champions without any preparation or, indeed, prompting. There was a hurried discussion between several of the staff over whether to stop him. "The champions... Victor Krum and Millicent Bulstrode!" The pair entered through the double doors and walked slowly towards the staff table where the champions were to eat-no one was entirely clear on why. It was a mark of human nature's capacity for adaptation that no one in the hall seemed particularly drawn to staring at Professor McGonagall, despite her revealing outfit.

Instead, they were looking at the unlikely couple who had just entered. "Here come Mademoiselle Delacour and Miss Girl-Tobi!"

There was relative quiet when the two entered. A small sigh of disappointment came from those who'd hoped that Fleur would wear something that flashed some skin instead of her recent trend towards excessively modest clothes. "I'm not sure how those two ended up together, but it should be an interesting dance, at least."

"And now, Professor Potter and YOWZA!" Jordan broke from his task to gape at the woman who had accompanied his instructor.

Circe wasn't all that tall, a few inches taller than Hari, who still had a fair bit of growing to do, but she carried herself with the supreme confidence of a woman who knew the world was hers to play with as she liked. Her features weren't quite delicate or fine, but her cheekbones were high and stood out strongly enough. Her eyes were dark brown, darker than her tanned skin that spoke of ancestry on the Mediterranean. Cascades of black hair that was somehow unruly and yet carefully coifed tumbled down behind her.

There was a study in contrasts going on between herself and the pale McGonagall who was only a few feet away. Where McGonagall was built sturdily, with a massive chest, Circe was merely well blessed. Her figure was more classically beautiful as well, a narrow waist that flared out to impressively curved hips and on to legs that stretched far longer than seemed right.

Where McGonagall's outfit covered as much as possible while under her geas, Circe's dress flaunted her beauty. The dress was a sky blue, but only on a technicality, since it was also a diaphanous fabric that was almost transparent, leaving more of a haze over her despite clinging to her form. The entire outfit was smoking almost literally; slow, whitish clouds puffed off of the garment. It managed to maintain the absolute minimum of modesty with much of her breasts covered by white light that seemed to form within the cloth, rather than be the fabric itself. A similarly shaded band that wrapped around her hips, hiding from view that which was considered intolerable in polite company. Despite that, her body was heavily on display, showing the lean lines and the slightest hint of a stomach

that made the lines of her pelvis more heavily defined by comparison.

Sapphires winked at her earlobes. A large star-sapphire dangled from a delicate chain, resting comfortably between her breasts, thanks to the low cut of the bodice that revealed almost as much as it could. Her smile was even and white and had a hungry edge to it that any student of Professor Potter was bound to note.

The biggest difference between her and McGonagall was in carriage, though. McGonagall seemed almost ashamed of her physical beauty—or, at least, uncomfortable with it. Circe clearly exulted in it. Her expression was one of someone luxuriating in attention.

Beside her, Professor Potter was dressed in moderately unusual fashion. He wore a white tuxedo, although the jacket was cut to end at his calves. In a way, it was more understated than usual, lacking his Akatsuki robe, but it was all the more noteworthy because of that oddity.

"Ahem." Lee Jordan took a few deep breaths, getting his brain back under control—thankfully, he'd had months of exposure to Professor McGonagall's new look and even all of November to get used to a demihuman with only partial control over her magical attraction. It still took a bit of work. "Accompanying Professor Potter is—"

"MOM?" Blaise's voice rang through the entire Hall. Lee Jordan was stymied again.

"Holy hell, Blaise," murmured Tam. "Your mom is *Circe Helious*? She was the meanest cocktease in Slytherin!"

"What?"

"I believe it's Circe Zabini, mother of Hogwarts's own Blaise Zabini. The story of how this happened should be interesting. And I bet there will be a distinct lack of idle speculation on how this came to be, since no one would want to offend Professor Potter."

The pair followed the others to the High Table. Fleur observed with a certain amount of smugness that Hari was as unaffected by the overt sensuality that Circe was throwing around as he was by her own nature. Mostly, she was glad that it meant she wasn't experiencing some sort of weakening of her abilities. The rest of the student body, on the other hand... the training of Professor McGonagall had been utterly insufficient when working against the actively seductive behavior on display. It took until Circe had taken a seat before the observers snapped out of their fugue, mostly because of their terror that Adjunct-Professor Moody would punish them for lack of vigilance (thankfully, he was staring as well and proceeded to use a suite of anti-charm spells on himself the moment he was able to focus).

Dumbledore rose to his feet and held out his hands. He had dressed more formally than usual, wearing a rather stern dress and pearls. "Thank you for showing up and not making me punish you. I welcome my former student back to the castle and remind her that while my students are the same ages they always are, she is much older than them and should please keep that in mind.

"Now that we have *that* formality out of the way, let's get on to the main event: food! Despite this being a ball and having set aside a good portion of the night for dancing, I am well aware that the most important aspect of the celebration is the meal-hence my delaying it as long as I can think of things to say!" He grinned at a sea of students who seemed completely unfazed by this announcement and frowned. Perhaps he had inured them to this too soon? He was silent for almost a minute as he considered the matter. "How odd. I think I'm out of things to say. Well then." He sat down. Moments later, he sprang up again. "I have it! I'm sure you're wondering how your food will get to you, yes?"

"From the kitchens?" called Gred.

"Indeed, Mister Weasley and, incidentally, six points from Gryffindor for that helpful tidbit. Did I forget that tonight is special? I guess I did. Tonight is special! Instead of having whatever the elves are making

(and whatever Professor Potter has requested), we will be having individually made-to-order food. That has the foreseen side-effect of slowing the meal down because the elves are making everything from scratch. I think I've gotten off topic. Wait, no, I just deviated slightly-you will order your food like this!" He returned to his seat, leaned down until his face was pressed against the empty space where plates would normally be and shouted: "PORK CHOP, MEDIUM. SIDE OF MASH AND GREENBEANS! ALSO, GOBLET OF FIREWHISKEY FROM SNAPE'S SUPPLY!" The purple tablecloth did little to mute the sound of the Headmaster's voice.

The Hall quickly turned into a cacophony as everyone rushed to order their food before anyone else so they'd get their food first. Professor Potter picked up the small bowl of white rice that appeared in front of him, plucked a pair of wooden chopsticks from his sleeve and began to eat with an expression of interest as he observed the chaos.

Draco Malfoy put a hand on Tracy's arm as she leaned down. "Don't bother." From his pocket, he pulled a brown paper bag. He set it on the table and withdrew two plates already prepared with chops, chicken, a bit of salad, and not a hint of potato. At Tracy's questioning glance, he shrugged. "I may have had a feeling that if I wanted to eat in a timely manner tonight, that I would be best served by arranging matters ahead of time."

"You're even being cagey about this?" her tone was incredulous.

"I am my father's son. No Malfoy admits *anything* if it's not necessary. And in all honesty, I'm my mother's son as well and the Blacks don't even admit things when it *is* necessary-they lie preemptively. I'm of the opinion that since the family is technically down to one member, not counting offspring of women married out of it, that their plan isn't the wisest. Oh, and that member managed to spend a decade in prison on a wrongful charge. Really not impressed at the moment."

"Two plates?"

"Well I do have a date, Tracy. It would be churlish of me to get myself dinner and not provide for you. Seriously, it's like you guys think that just because Malfoys tend to be manipulative sons of bitches that we don't know how to behave in proper society. My mother raised me to be a gentleman." He looked at their faces. "Really? Come on! Sure, I was a prick in my first year. And my second year. Just because I acted like a complete jackass doesn't mean I don't know how to behave." He glowered at them.

"Actually," Tracy said, a small smile gracing her lips. "I was more asking about why it was only two plates instead of enough for everyone in our little circle."

"Oh." Malfoy stared at her for several moments. "Do you know, it never occurred to me?" He paused. "Besides, I didn't know what the seating was going to be like, so I couldn't know how many people I'd be needing to feed even if I *had* thought of it. And do you really care if your dates get fed?" the question was directed at Daphne and Pansy.

Daphne had come with a Third Year Ravenclaw who looked like he wasn't sure if he was incredibly lucky to be going out with a pretty, older girl, or if he was going to die for doing something wrong. Daphne felt he was doing pretty well at not actually crying. Unlike Pansy's date.

Pansy had simply walked up to a First Year Slytherin, shoved her gun in his face, and informed him that he would be going to the Ball as her date and that if his hands did anything even slightly questionable, she'd make sure his parents got his body back over the course of months. The poor boy was sitting on his hands and had tears running down his face. In deference to Pansy's (normally) bad mood, he was keeping the sobs quiet.

"Not really," Pansy said. Daphne shrugged.

"I care if *my* date eats," Blaise said. He was pointedly not looking at the Head Table and Hermione had a hand pinning his wrist to the

table. "Especially since if she does, maybe I'll be able to get free and kill Potter for defiling my mother."

The first time he'd said something like that, the table had responded with admonishments not to do something stupid like that and to keep his voice down. By now, they just treated it as background noise. Hermione patted his hand. "I doubt Hari is defiling her, Blaise."

"Not for lack of trying on her part," murmured Draco, dodging to the side as a knife whipped at him from beside Blaise. "Please refrain from throwing the cutlery, you'll need it for eating soon." He smirked. "Probably."

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==OMAKE==

Inoichi frowned as he observed his best friend's son. Even more than his daughter, the young man was not taking things well. He'd just thrown himself into training hard. Shikamaru was racing about a clearing in the Nara forest; his legs were lost from the knee down in inky blackness that lashed around in tendrils about him and slithered along the ground while he threw kunai and shuriken, dodging and parrying with the kunai in his left hand. The cigarette in his mouth glowed brightly and the smoke he exhaled was an ashen cloud filled with flickering embers.

"He's been like this every day," Shikaku murmured beside Inoichi. "Wakes up early in the morning and goes straight to training until he collapses, then he eats a bit and goes right back to it. If Ino and Choji come by, they get dragged into various scenarios that he drills them on until he's satisfied."

"I see." The cloud this time flowed across the clearing and then exploded in a gout of fire. Shikamaru was holding one hand in the last seal of the family technique's sequences, maintaining the

shadow exercise at a level well beyond what was required and even necessarily useful as he forced himself to go well passed the point of exhaustion, his chakra nearly drained as much as his body.

"He's going through explosive tags like candy, too," Shikaku said. "I don't even know where he's getting all of them. Some of them are *definitely* not regulation tags-larger yield for one thing. The only one who can keep up with his idea of training is Naruto, and that doesn't really count."

"I'm not sure what I can do, really," Inoichi admitted. "Excessive training in response to trauma is pretty much within the expected parameters for a ninja. Even if I'd never have thought Shikamaru was one to cope that way. And it's not like seeking revenge is outside our job description either. Part and parcel with our life, my friend."

"Just... just see if you can get through to him at all. If he burns himself out, he'll never manage to get the revenge he's so desperate for."

(A/N John)

So we are officially closing the poll as of November 13, 2017 9:47 EST. As things stand, publishing the other things we are working on wins by a slim margin. That's the way democracy works. In deference to the fact that I'd like to get this particular millstone detached from my neck, we'll probably lean towards mostly Itachi.

(A/N 2 John)

I'm not sure whether to be glad or sad that so few people wanted the darker story. It's a really grim tale we've got going there, but I hope it doesn't mean people didn't like *Now Die!* and just prefer things of a cheerful nature.

(A/N 3 John)

In order to facilitate the distribution of the next work of fiction to be expressed via the internet to our readers, I hereby intend to give a (very) short overview of the two stories.

***For My Brother* (Provisional Title):** Itachi decides he can't torment Sasuke at the last minute and so changes things drastically.

***Blood is Thicker* :** Ino gets a good deal of training from the one man Inoichi wished she'd never met, the terror of T&I, his younger brother.

(A/N 4 John)

Blood is Thicker is a rare example of me breaking my own rules and allowing for OCs. The characters in question have been sitting around our files for a time now and Spoon suggested the path this fic could start along. It blossomed into a story that I think just escapes the Horror and Suspense tags.

(A/N 5 John)

***For My Brother*, on the other hand, owes a good deal of its life to *Uchibi Sasuke* . Not intentionally, but there is a definite resemblance in some ways. Other ways, though, are very, very different. And somewhat absurd. It amuses us, though.**

We're Back!

Chapter 91: We're BACK!

Dumbledore watched with mild amusement as one of his former students draped herself over one of his current students... although that was always a bit of a question, considering his guest-lecturer status. He'd have been more worried about the whole thing if Professor Potter had given Ms. Zabini much notice. He was carrying on a conversation with Fleur Delacour, apparently unaware of the attractive woman playing with the cardinal-red shock of hair on his head. He would probably need to step in at some point to deal with it anyway, but for now...

"I'm telling you no!" Fleur growled. "I have enough comments in my life already. I do not need more of them!"

"It's that or nothing." Hari insisted. "It's the only spot left. I haven't had time to experiment with other methods and Professor McGonagall made it clear that I shouldn't put soul-enchantments on clothing."

"Why would you care?" asked Krum. "It's not like it could make you any less attractive." He blinked when he realized that no fireball had come at his face. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yes, yes," Fleur waved a hand dismissively. "But I've realized you're suffering from brain damage after too many bludger hits. It's wrong to attack the mentally infirm."

Somehow, Girl-Tobi produced a ham that was dripping in honey glaze and was carving sections of it off for herself as food slowly began to fill various plates in the hall without any apparent pattern. There was a certain fascination in watching slice after slice somehow vanish and the sounds of chewing, despite the mask not leaving her face.

"Does anyone know why Tam is hovering near the table?" Millie gestured at the redhead who was hanging around behind McGonagall's seat.

"I asked her if she had a date and she said yes," replied Dumbledore.

"That reminds me, Minerva," Circe's eyes had a wicked gleam and her smile was just on the cusp of cruel. "What ever happened to that young man you used to date?" McGonagall's face went stony. "Tom Riddle, right? Such a charmer, he was." Circe watched the stone visage somehow grow colder still. "He never danced to my tune, though. I always wondered what he saw in a little goodie-good like you, though." Now McGonagall's face had a dark scowl. "Did he finally get tired of you and give the old heave ho?"

"No!" the word came out as a harsh roar.

"Definitely dumped." Circe nodded to herself and gave McGonagall a once-over. "I bet you could get him back now if you wanted. I mean, he must have seen *something* in you. And they always say it's the quiet ones..." She didn't blink as Hari's chopsticks intercepted the raking claws on McGonagall's right hand as she tried to dig them into Circe's face. "Wow. Must have been a bad break up then."

"He. Was. *Evil!* "

"Worse than I thought." Circe glanced at Tam, whose face was a ghastly, pallid shade of white under her freckles. "Interesting." Tam turned and fled, somehow using the staff exit in her haste. "On a related subject: do you have any idea why one of your students was checking you out?"

McGonagall glared. "Are you seriously asking me that?"

"When it's a thirteen-year-old girl? Yes; yes I am."

McGonagall froze. "What?"

"You always were clueless, Minerva. You didn't even realize Tom was interested until I told you he'd been checking you out for months. And even then, I had to tell him to just ask you out already. But now you're an adult and you have kids looking at you like you're more than a piece of meat. What's with that?" Circe ignored the fact that she'd begun to drag perfectly kept nails along Hari's arm as she spoke.

"You *what*?"

"Yeah. For someone so charming, he didn't think you'd be willing to give him the time of day, being in Slytherin and all. I probably hadn't been helping your impressions, come to think of it. But I told him to stop being a baby and go ask you out." McGonagall began to open her mouth and then stalled, apparently unsure of what to say. "I really do wonder what went wrong though. When I graduated, you pretty much had him wrapped around your finger and he seemed perfectly happy with that."

McGonagall stared at her, claws digging through the tablecloth and scoring the wood.

Dumbledore smiled to himself before spotting that young Sasori watching the whole exchange with a gaze that was far too interested for someone so young.

"Albus," hiss Karkaroff. "What in the hells is going on in your school?" he was staring at Circe's hands which were just shy of playing with her date's shirt-buttons.

"I do believe we have a predator who is confused by the lack of response from prey. Or just hunting a bigger predator without being part of a pack. Either way, it's quite entertaining, don't you think?"

Snape sighed. "I think I will need to have a word with your son, Ms. Zabini." Despite his status as a professor, he was well aware that she had graduated before he was born and felt distinctly

uncomfortable calling a very attractive, older woman by her given name.

"Why would you need to do that? He told me he was doing well in your class. Has some disciplinary matter come up?"

"Nothing like that. I just think he may try to murder your date."

Circe blinked. "Why would he do that?"

"I couldn't begin to claim an understanding of the teenage mind. Despite seven years as one and a further decade teaching them, my ability to fathom the depths of illogic such brains are capable of is simply insufficient to deal with reality. Nevertheless, I am rather good at spotting intended violence after a few years in Professor Potter's company."

"Glad to help, Professor Snape."

"Of course he noticed that part." Snape closed his eyes for a moment, then returned to the subject at hand. "And I do believe that your son is staring at your date with a look that I normally associate with attempted murder-a particular facial expression I have had a good deal of experience seeing when my former... associates didn't wear their masks."

"Huh. That's odd; my son is usually such a peaceful boy. Well, I'll talk to him." Circe shrugged and turned back to Professor McGonagall, who was still growling under her breath and trying to dig her claws into the wood.

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"Finally." Pansy's voice had a distinctly unhappy edge to it that sent her date clambering to hide under his chair, fist in his teeth to muffle the terrified sobs. She had been getting less and less pleased by the

time it was taking for her food to appear. Daphne and her date had both managed to start their meals, as had Blaise and Hermione. Now she had a meal and it was cold.

"It's odd," said Hermione. Her shark-teeth had quickly and efficiently removed all the meat from a drumstick and she was now using a napkin to clean the associated grease from her lips. "You ordered before we did."

"I am aware of this."

"If it weren't for Tam's food, you'd probably be in a worse mood than you are."

"Also true."

"Though that raises an interesting question," put in Tracy. "Why did Tam leave? And through the staff exit, too."

Draco shrugged. "People do odd things sometimes. I guess maybe something came up?"

"That doesn't sound like Tam."

"Well, I don't really know her, do I?"

"I'm not looking forwards to dancing," Pansy was grumbling, her gaze trained on the quivering chair beside her.

"Why not?" Draco cocked his head. "Your date is a pureblood, right?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. He was just the first idiot I spotted."

"Does it matter, Malfoy?" Hermione sounded waspish.

"Well, in terms of quality, I refuse to comment. But purebloods are all taught to dance pretty young."

"Oh. I withdraw my angered statement."

"Of course, that only applies to the rich ones. As far as I know, the Weasleys don't teach their brood to dance. Probably because they don't have time."

"I feel like I should object, but that sounds like you're just stating facts."

"I think so, anyway." He gave another shrug. "It's not like I spend my time keeping track of what they do. I have better uses for my time." He glanced at Pansy. "This all wraps around to my original point: if he's a pureblood, then there's a real chance he can at least pretend."

"But I don't like dancing. Dancing is something I do when my parents are around and that means that I need firewhiskey."

"Uh..." Draco looked over at Tracy, confusion etched on his features.

"Don't ask."

"Alright then."

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"So, what do you think the next task is going to be?" asked Krum. That he was in a good mood was apparent. He had a slight touch of color to his cheeks, normally just tanned from hours practicing in the sun. The small glass in his hand held a clear liquid he had called 'slivovitz' and had ignored his headmaster's disapproving frown when he poured Millie a generous couple of fingers.

"We are setting aside the ongoing matter of Mister Sasori's challenges, yes?" Fleur, on the other hand, had confined herself to wine that she'd had fetched from the carriage outside. Despite Krum's offer to give her a 'drink that would help her be a proper woman', she had managed to resist the temptation to set him on fire again.

"Yep. How goes that, anyway?"

"Not bad." Hari was sticking with water for the most part, but had allowed a small saucer of rice wine since that seemed to be the order of the day among the champions. "I think that we'll come into the home stretch on the first round soon."

"I just hope it's fun!" Girl-Tobi had asked to try each of the liquors in turn and had been turned down by all three; even Hari didn't think it was a good idea to give her alcohol. In deference to the nature of their discussions, he had allowed that Girl-Tobi could have a glass of chocolate milk, which had a similar impact on her.

"Well, considering that you enjoyed the first task so much-

"The dragon was super friendly!" Girl-Tobi interjected. "She kept trying to set me on fire, but she wasn't very good at it. I tried to help her get better and everything."

"-yes, well, I figure that you might like the next one as well." Krum managed to finish, gesturing randomly with his glass. He wasn't drunk after only a flask of his preferred poison, but having several glasses and Millie beside him meant he was slightly tipsy.

"The next task in February," Dumbledore lied in his most helpful tone. "It will be the second of the originally planned tasks."

"And I expect someone to complete the first challenge by no later than a week from tomorrow," said Sasori. He had been watching Hari carefully since the sake had first come out. It was to his everlasting gratitude that his nephew's sage abilities seemed to burn through the alcohol before the world had to find out what chaos a drunk Hari would sow.

"So the one involving the egg, then?" Fleur murmured. "I wonder what that stupid rhyme means. It's hard enough taking apart poetry in a proper language. Dissecting words in this bastard tongue is near impossible."

"It's not much easier for me," admitted Krum. "Maybe harder. They don't use as many loans from the mother tongue."

"If it makes the both of you feel better, I know what the poem means," Hari offered. He neglected to mention that it was because he'd seen the list of tasks in Dumbledore's desk.

"Will you share?"

"Why? I thought it's supposed to be a surprise?"

"It is," said Dumbledore. "Of course, give it a few weeks and I'm sure your fellow champions will have had... 'miraculous' breakthroughs in their understanding which I'm sure will be *totally without their judge's assistance* ."

"Of course," said Madame Maxime.

"How dare you accuse us otherwise," said Igor Karkaroff.

"Mine already knows," said Sasori.

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==OMAKE==

It had taken weeks of planning and another month of spreading misinformation to ensure that the right team was sent on the mission. Shikamaru had no idea where the Intel division got the fact that this team was searching for the Six-Tails, but it had been essential. Now, things were coming together. It was just a question of whether the strike team was properly selected. Despite how much they wanted to be part of it, Ino and Choji had been left behind. In theory, Shikamaru had no business leading this mission, both because of his personal stake and because he was still a chūnin, but he'd insisted that he wouldn't reveal his plan otherwise and no one had been able to convince his family to work it out for them.

The team consisted of only four people, and three of them were there to deal with the other half of the threat (albeit with specific instructions from Shikamaru on how to execute it).

Kakuzu leapt backwards as he heard the sound of chirping birds in the bit of scrub that adorned the otherwise bleak landscape of Mist. One Thousand Birds wasn't something he had personally encountered before, but it was famous as being an assassination technique that alerted its victim and still worked.

It occurred to him just a moment too late that the fact that he had the time to leap back meant that he was supposed to do so. But then Hatake Kakashi was streaking out of the gloom with a handful of lightning and a gleaming red eye glowing balefully. Earth Spear wasn't going to be helpful and it was only sheer luck that let him shift enough that the blade of energy only carved a chunk out of his side instead of ramming into a heart.

"Good job," grumbled a pink-haired young woman in a chūnin vest came pounding from the murk, fist cocked back. "Way to miss the first shot." Kakazu rapidly hardened his skin against impact and let out a vicious curse when her fist stove in his reinforced hide and neatly tore another hunk of flesh and tentacle from his body. He was running out of spots that weren't his heart and if he kept facing attacks that ignored his defenses, this was going to be a very hard fight.

Hidan raised an eyebrow at the chūnin who stepped out in front of him. "One person? That's all I merit?"

The chūnin blew out a cloud of blue smoke that blended with the mist. "Yep. Honestly, I think even one is overkill."

"You little shit," snarled the man as he threw his scythe.

"If it weren't for the fact that you killed my mentor, I'm not sure I could have been bothered to actually get involved in this fight." The boy had stepped back a few paces and partly vanished into the mist. "I

mean, given your actual level of skill, this is really a job for a few genin."

"I'm going to pull your balls out through your mouth and use your sperm to write my name on your mother's rectum!" Hidan dragged his weapon back to him and flung it at the source of the voice.

"Seriously. Did you ever learn to fight? Or do you just rely on not dying? Because I think I found a flaw in that plan."

"Come out and say that to my face. I'll grind your flesh to paste and feed it to your family you cuntspewed reject from your mother's womb. You should have dripped down the whore's legs with the rest of that week's deposits." Hidan stormed into the murk, hunting for the voice that just chuckled. Then froze, his limbs not responding to his commands. "What the fuck did you do, you piece of donkey smegma? Poisons don't last long on me and when I'm free, I'm going to clear my blueballs in your guts."

"I don't propose to tell you." The man slipped into view, one hand formed into a ram seal. The other held a string. "But I do appreciate how much you've cooperated in your annihilation." He yanked on the string and dozens of traps twanged, sending wires with dangling trails of explosive tags whirling through the air to encase Hidan. "At first, I'd thought I would test the limits of your immortality. Then I realized that it was best to be sure. Primacord and explosive tags and lots of shaped charges." Hidan's head tilted to look at the ground, which was papered with more cords and notes. "Instead, I think I will bury your constituent bits under several tons of rock and then crush you with earth techniques. If you ever reach hell, tell them you were sent by your superior." Hidan's world exploded.

"What the fuck was that?" huffed Kakuzu. He'd lost his lightning heart to a cheap shot by the Copy Ninja while he'd been busy fighting off a dozen orange-clad boys with spinning sharingan who were taking a great deal of enjoyment at pressuring him with both whirling balls of chakra and gouts of black fire that burned merrily at the ground despite a lack of fuel.

"Probably your partner dying," replied the pink-haired girl as she dove around the fire heart that had been trying to cut her off and came rushing at him. "Hold still and this will hurt like a bitch."

This was not how this fight should be going! But Hatake Kakashi was enough of a threat on his own and the other two were far more dangerous than anyone their age had a right to be. Especially if that was the Nine-Tails attacking him. Every time he had what he thought was an exit, there was a group of clones flinging around high-ranked techniques with the same casual disregard for chakra exhaustion as Kisame and Hari demonstrated. And there went his air-heart. He'd been trying to line up Kakashi for a Pressure Damage and so had kept it inside him, but that meant that he could only afford to send out his fire heart. At least that heart had spotted the blasted original. Hopefully he could force the brat onto the defensive long enough to escape what was now obviously a trap.

There was a sound like a bell that became thousands of bells that became an unholy screaming of damned souls. He watched as Intelligent Hard Work flew from the fire heart towards a spot hidden in mist. Then there was a sound like fire hitting fuel and a ball of red flame came running at him, carried by Uzumaki Naruto, wrapped in an ethereal warrior with three arms and sporting a tail. The red turned to orange, then yellow, then blue, then white. He had a moment to witness the shield held by one of the warrior's arms slam down between him and the brat and then the world turned into a series of explosions.

(A/N John)

We're BACK! What with things picking up, we had less time to write and *For My Brother's* muse has been driving my attention recently. But I promised I would not be one of those authors who just abandons a story, so we return to this tale.

(A/N 2 John)

Besides, Spoon and I have planned much of the rest of the fic out already. It's just a matter of writing it. As much fun as Fourth Year is, I'm looking forwards to finishing it so we can move on to the plot and the absolute chaos we have planned for Fifth Year.

(A/N 3 John)

We've also taken some pains to try and align the events of the Naruto 'verse with those of the Potter 'verse. By which I mean that we've got a good idea of what happens there at a given time here, not that there is a one-to-one connection.

(A/N 4 John)

Poor Hidan. Shikamaru's ability to plan and make use of a pre-planned battlefield against Hidan was really not a fair contest. And while even with the Sharingan, Naruto isn't really a match for Kakuzu, that's changed drastically when the S-rank Ace (more on my theories on ranking systems will almost certainly appear as long-winded rants in *For My Brother*) is thrown into the mix. And I hadn't really planned it until I wrote Sakura swinging her fist that Kakuzu's defense techniques weren't going to be effective against someone who learned close combat from Tsunade.

In Their Preventatives

Chapter 92: In Their Preventatives

Dumbledore rose from his seat. "And that concludes the meal portion of the evening." He smiled at the assembled students, some of whom had yet to receive their food. "We will now proceed to the dancing. Champions, you are expected to lead the first dance." He spread his hands and the tables shuffled themselves around, clearing a large square in the middle of the Hall to serve as a dance floor.

Hari stood and offered Circe his arm. She rested her hand on it with a fluttering of her lashes that he was either ignoring or missing entirely. Beside him, Fleur was working out how to dance with the girl who was more than a foot shorter than her. Krum had already swept Millie up into his arms and made directly for the open area.

The first hauntingly chipper strains filled the air as the players got the bagpipes to full blast. In seconds, the Hall was filled with the blare of pipes, mixed with the cry of strings, and a steady drumbeat. The lead vocalist was singing in something that was probably an early form of Latin and nearly incomprehensible to everyone.

Fleur was firmly led by Girl-Tobi in a simple box-step. It was completely out of sync with the song, but was something the two of them could reliably manage despite their height disparity. Viktor Krum was whirling Millie around the dance floor, the two of them apparently in their own world where the rhythm fit their frenetic pace. By comparison, Professor Potter and Lady Zabini were more tame, but only because of that. In order to address the height problem, Professor Potter was floating eight inches off the ground. They were managing to keep to the beat, but their dance was some freakish bastard-offspring of a waltz, given that they were dancing to a two-beat song. There were more than a few wolf-whistles when Professor Potter dipped Lady Zabini so far back that her hair was

brushing the ground. No one was sure what he said while his face was near her ear, but she flushed and her eyes bugged out slightly for a moment before her face was again playfully seductive, with a hint of confused admiration for the smirking Professor who continued the dance without any other sign of the interaction.

Several of Hari's friends grabbed the various utensils as they began to move. "Blaise," hissed Hermione, "you can commit suicide when you're not my date!"

"I'll kill him," snarled the boy. "I don't know what he said to my mother, but it must have been obscene."

"Probably," Draco said and quailed slightly under the nearly murderous gazes of the girls at the table. "Just judging from her actions this evening, that's the only thing that'd get a rise out of her!" He held his hands up, warding off assault. "Withdrawn!"

"Blaise, if you try and kill Hari, the best that will happen is he won't realize." Daphne was trying a placating tone. "At worst, your mother will be sad because she'll be burying her only child."

Blaise subsided, growling in the back of his throat as he did.

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"I wouldn't..."

Tracy looked over at Draco, who'd spoken just as she dipped a cup into the bowl of punch. "Why?"

"Well, I'm not sure what it's poisoned with, and Professor Potter was really specific about us not imbibing that kind of thing."

"Fair enough. I had been planning to test what poisons are in it, though."

"Never mind then." Draco shrugged. "I've done my duty as your date to keep you from killing yourself while in my care. Carry on."

"I rather think Professor Potter's lessons got through to everyone. No one's drinking... the... punch." Tracy watched as Fleur took a deep gulp. "Well, I guess we can watch..." Tracy blinked as Fleur looked off in thought and then pulled a vial from some invisible pocket, emptying its contents into the remaining punch. "Weird. I'd think whatever's in there would be pretty instant in lethality."

"Well, she's been modified by Professor Potter, Tracy. I don't think normal rules apply to her anymore."

"An apt observation, Mr. Malfoy." The pair shrieked when Professor Snape's voice came from directly behind them. "Pardon me." The tall man slipped around them and dipped a flask into the punch. "I shall look forwards to finding out what sort of messy, horrible death someone felt would be humorous to inflict on my students. It should prove instructive."

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"Why aren't you dead?"

Fleur turned around to see the red-haired man in the robe like Hari's.
"Come again?"

"Why. Aren't. You. Dead?" Sasori used the careful pronunciation used with the slow of thinking and foreigners.

"Um..." her head cocked to the side. "Why would I be dead?"

"You drank the punch."

"I did. It needed a bit of nightshade to get the flavors balanced." Sasori's face was blank, but somehow conveyed an impression of

confusion. "Really, it had a lovely spice to it, but without the bitterness of deadly nightshade, it was just too sweet."

"I feel as if this conversation has gotten away from me. At least I feel at home."

"I want to speak with you about the punch."

Sasori turned his head to see Circe scowling at him. "Oh?"

"What's with using a poison that isn't tasteless? It obviously isn't fast-acting enough to get away with that."

"Against any carbon-based lifeform, it should have been instantly lethal."

"Obviously it wasn't."

"I would instead posit that this," he gestured at Fleur, who appeared amused by the exchange, "is not, in fact, a carbon-based lifeform. That is simplest explanation."

"No," Circe snapped. "The simplest explanation is that you're a talentless amateur." She whirled and sashayed off towards Hari, hips swaying and keeping much of the Hall's attention as a result.

Sasori blinked slowly. Once.

"Mr. Sasori?" Fleur said carefully. "Hari will probably be upset if you murder his date."

"And if his isn't, I will be," said Dumbledore from behind them. "No killing the parents of my students. I don't want to deal with *more* angst than teenagers have naturally. You can wait until they graduate." He paused. "Though I understand she's getting married soon and her son isn't too attached to the man, so it wouldn't cause me trouble if you killed the husband."

"Not unless I get paid. Otherwise I'd be stepping on Hari's toes."

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"Blaise, if you don't stop glaring at Hari at focus on dancing, I'm going to make you drink the punch. I'm tired of having my toes crushed."

"She's all over him," hissed Blaise.

"Yes. And Hari seems to be ignoring it." Hermione sighed as Hari chose that moment to dip Circe again, letting her wrap a leg around his waist to keep from tumbling to the ground. "I'm not kidding, Blaise. Do not step on my toes one more time."

Nearby, Pansy was enduring the one dance she was obligated to engage in with her date. He was scrupulously ensuring his hands touched nowhere that might be felt as untoward. Daphne slipped by with her fearful companion struggling to keep up in a dance intended to be led by the man.

"Are you suggesting my mother isn't good enough for him?" demanded Blaise.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Then Blaise was tumbling off the dance floor, propelled by a blast of force. He managed to bring himself to a halt just before he would have slammed into the wall. Hermione turned on her heel and marched off towards where Madam Pomfrey was sitting.

Pansy shoved the boy away from her and scowled. "Fuck this shit."

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Draco winced. "Oh boy."

Tracy froze. "Do we need to run?"

"I don't think so. But Pansy's just shoved her way onto the stage. Oh."

"What?"

"I can't hear you!" Draco shouted. Tracy looked at him and saw that he'd shoved a pair of earplugs into his ears. "Pansy's got out her music thing!"

The music ground to a halt as Pansy casually banished the singer out of her way and placed the device on the floor. She pressed a button and the Hall began to ring with the sound of gangster rap. Pansy drew her gun. "Get back to dancing, bitches!"

Fred and Gred looked at each other and shrugged before dragging their dates to the center of the rapidly emptying dance floor and throwing themselves into a series of highly involved dance moves that required putting to use much of Professor Potter's physical education regime. Moments later, they were joined by Girl-Tobi, who was almost a blur as she displayed energy enough for three.

From his seat at the High Table, Dumbledore was waving his fingers as though conducting the music, a pair of pink, fluffy earmuffs on his head and a content smile on his face. Snape had apparently cast some form of personalized silence, because he was sipping from a glass of wine.

Around the room, most of the students were hastily conjuring ear protection or casting fields of silence, only to find that the spells they'd learned for such purposes were not effective against whatever it was Hari had done to make the thing. Mad-Eye was glad to see that the focus on conjuration was paying dividends: students were managing to create rather thorough ear-protection.

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Hari was sitting beside Fleur, who was sipping another glass of the punch.

"That is some impressively vulgar language," she commented after listening for a time.

"I tried to find something to her parents' tastes. They swear rather often and Curse even more." Hari shrugged. "I don't know if they liked it or not. They're always so glad to see me that they use foul words and throw friendly Curses at me."

Fleur blinked and looked down at the punch for a moment. Then she remembered that this was Hari who was talking and that reality seemed to be someone else's problem when he was involved. "Are you comfortable?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" asked Hari at the same time that Circe raised her head enough to nod and say "yes," before returning to her position draped over Hari, head resting on his shoulder.

Fleur shrugged. "Your son is a little upset."

"Yes, well, he's a silly boy sometimes. I'm glad that he's not only interested in boys, though. I mean, Hari's a lovely boy, but I do want grandchildren. Of course, Miss Granger seems to be a little upset with him at the moment. I'm sure he'll cheer her up, though."

"I did not realize your Headmaster was so limber," said Fleur. She was watching as an earmuffed Dumbledore dragged Madame Maxime onto the dance floor and began to lead her into something that resembled the jitterbug, but with more energy. The pair were rapidly clearing the floor around them with flailing limbs. "I wonder, though, does anyone plan to actually follow the beat?" So far, the dozen or so dancers were all out of step with both the music and each other, the result being an unsynchronized mass of competing couples (and a trio where Girl-Tobi had managed to drag Daphne and her date into the chaos).

"They do seem to be having fun," Snape said as he sat down at their table. "Which is more than can be said for many school events." He closed his eyes as Dumbledore led an attempt to sing the school song louder than the music. "I wish he wouldn't do that. Or, at least, pick a single tune."

"Does Krum know the words to your school song?" Fleur stared at Viktor, who had an arm around Millie's shoulders and was belting out the words to something.

"No idea. But not knowing the lyrics rather embodies the spirit of the Hogwarts song. At least since Dumbledore became Headmaster." Circe trailed a finger along Hari's chest, grinning at the furious expression on Snape's face. Snape decided he didn't want to know what caused her to squeak and blush enough to redden her dark skin. It would probably be something he'd have to deal with and that would kill the mild buzz he'd been building up over the evening. He was a little worried about the intent way that Sasori was staring at Hari's date from a corner; he hoped that the man heeded Dumbledore's orders not to cause his students trauma—he had them learning from Professor Potter and didn't want to know what would happen if they became emotionally disturbed.

On the dance floor, Girl-Tobi was forcing people to join a conga line.

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Pansy observed the chaos. "This is more like it," she said, pulling a bottle of firewhiskey from somewhere and taking a long pull from the bottle. Flames curled from her lips as she sighed in satisfaction.

Draco winced. "That's the last bottle in her case."

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==OmAKE==

Lucius Malfoy accepted the letter from his son's owl. The boy wrote less frequently since Professor Potter took up the post of... well, he had a lot of temporary titles, but as far as Lucius was concerned, the all came under the heading of "terrifying". On the upside, his son's letters were more interesting and tended to not be a litany of complaints and demands for things. Overall, it was a wash, as far as he was concerned-at least as long as the lad kept on the slightly crooked and narrow (outright criminality was no longer a safe activity in Britain, but a bit of creativity was not, as of yet, lethal).

He read the letter. Then he read it again. Then a third time, just to be sure he'd understood the request correctly. It was nice that it was an actual request, rather than an attempt to order him around, but still... He snapped his fingers. "Mimsy, tell Narcissa to get in here."

A few minutes later, his wife entered the room. He took a moment to appreciate the view. Without guests expected, she was wearing a dressing gown that would have left things to the imagination if he hadn't had a good seventeen years to memorize it. "So when did your son become a drunk?"

Narcissa blinked at the apparently random statement. Then her face turned from beautiful to lovely and cold. " *My son?* If he's a lush, it's from your side."

"The hell it is; I don't drink."

"I only drink socially!" she snapped back. Thankfully, they'd developed a rule early in their marriage that no matter how furious the argument, neither would reach for a wand. Lucius had occasionally had a lamp thrown at his head, but considering his wife's family, he'd accept that over having the two of them throwing dark spells around their house. Setting aside that that each of them would regret it if they managed to actually harm the other, it would wreck the place.

"But I don't drink *at all* ."

Narcissa drew in a breath to start shouting some more and stopped.
"Draco's at school. How would you decide he's a drunk from three thousand miles away?"

"He sent a letter asking for a case of firewhiskey. A case . And he wants another one every other month for the rest of the year. If he hasn't developed a serious drinking habit, then he's planning to open a bar in Hogwarts."

"Oh." Narcissa said. "Send it to him."

" *What?* Never mind encouraging him; do you have *any* idea how much trouble it will be to smuggle a whole case of firewhiskey into the castle from here?"

"Not all that much." She shrugged in a way that, while not obviously so, intentionally drew his attention away from arguing and towards agreeing with whatever she was saying.

"Let's say I can do it, then. Why are we encouraging him to drink that much?" Her smirk would have been frightening to anyone else, he'd always found his wife's plotting and deviousness to be her best (mental) feature. She knew it, too. That was why she was swaying her hips as she stalked across the room and then straddling his lap.
"What do you know?"

"It's not for him."

As much as he enjoyed the way things were progressing, his hands settling on her waist, he had to ask: "please tell me he isn't planning to start a bar. I'm fairly certain that there would be objections."

"He isn't."

"Love," Lucius sighed as she nuzzled against his throat. "I already asked you what you know."

"So you did."

"Narcissa. Just tell me so we can get on with making up for the fight."

"It's for Parkinson." She bit the side of his neck lightly.

"Why would you mention an underage girl while we're doing this?" Lucius demanded, feeling his lust draining away.

"Because she's the drunk? Though I hear that it doesn't seem to cause her to actually *get* drunk."

He pushed her back so he could see her face. "I'd thought those were rumors."

"Nope. My sources-

"You and your mysterious 'sources'," Malfoy grumbled.

"You love the mystery," she chided. "Anyway, my sources tell me that she started last summer after Hari Potter rode with her on a motorcycle to that party. The one where the elder Parkison lost his arm. So agree to send him the case in the morning and let me get back to what I was doing."

Lucius considered for a moment, felt her nibbling at his jaw, and decided that doing as his amazing wife insisted was probably the best course of action.

(A/N John)

Despite how much I enjoy working on *For My Brother*, this story has a special place in my heart. And I'm still working on it. This is not abandoned. If anything, I'm looking forwards to the chaos that I get to unleash when this year ends.

(A/N 2 John)

I realized we've had this talk before, but for all that Sakura was annoying and pretty useless pre-time skip, afterwards, she's a competent ninja. And definitely the kind of person to bring for close combat with someone who turns his skin to stone.

(A/N 3 John)

Unlike my usual practice, this omake was written at the time of the chapter after a discussion with Spoon in which we thought that Draco should try and ensure that Pansy isn't trying to go through school dry. I also decided to take a somewhat unusual tack in fanfiction and make the Malfoys a loving couple who happen to be a bit on the evil side (although with Professor Potter's graduates entering the workforce in general and the aurors in particular, indulging that evilness is definitely becoming less direct and, well, evil)

(A/N 4 John)

I'm sure Spoon hopes that enough of you request that we begin publishing our darker project. I have refused to send her the files because it amuses me and so she knows that if she wants to read it at will, it needs to be published. Otherwise, I'll probably hold off until I can finish *Itachi* or *For My Brother*. Not to mention that we have a couple of random oneshots in the works because sometimes dinner doesn't end up including me writing because we spend the whole time discussing some idea that is usually the brainchild of Spoon's experience with a badfic.

(A/N 5 John)

Speaking of badfics. Would anyone care to suggest some form of creature!Harry which hasn't been done to death? So no werewolves or vampires or demons or veela. I look forwards to your ideas.-John Out

Gifts again

Chapter 93: Gifts again

Christmas morning dawned bright and early. Hari's friends in Slytherin were surprised to discover no boxes from him at the feet of their beds. Had it been anyone else, there might have been concern that he'd taken ill; instead there was just a sense of foreboding which was not reduced by seeing Hari sitting in the Common Room with a smile on his face. Someone had conjured a Christmas tree which was so laden with tinsel and glowing lights and dangling charms that it was presumed a tree only on the grounds of having a coniferous shape.

"Since everyone stayed for the holiday," Hari said, "I decided I would be traditional and put the presents under the tree."

The group looked skeptically at the alleged tree. Daphne tentatively bent down and brushed aside a wall of tinsel to find a collection of boxes. A wave of her hand floated the presents to their recipients.

"Nothing for me?" Tracy asked.

"You're studying," explained Daphne.

"That means your gift is that you are to study more," said Hermione. She opened the box in her lap and blinked. "Hari... is this the Magna Carta?"

"Yes."

"I'm not going to ask how you got one of this legally."

"Funny you should-"

"Hush." Hermione pointed at the book, using a suite of charms she'd found to preserve old manuscripts and then cuddled the text to her

chest. "I'm going to maintain my assertion that this is a legal acquisition and not part of the spree of robberies over the summer."

Mille drew a set of robes out of the box. "These are nice."

"Enchanted kevlar. You're working in the summers now," Hari said. "If they actually come in handy, let me know so I can step up your training." Millie gulped and nodded.

Blaise pulled from his box a set of antique dueling clothes. He looked over the ornate clothing and decided he didn't want to ask where Hari had found a set that was exactly his size. "Thanks," he grumbled. He wasn't over seeing his mother float fairly float out of the Ball the night before, glowing and blushing in equal measure.

Tam looked at the selection of cat toys and treats in her box and slammed the top back onto it with undue haste, turning bright red. Holding the thing in her hands, she fled the room.

"She's doing that rather often," murmured Daphne. She examined her gift. "An all-expenses-paid trip to Crete." She squawked as Hermione elbowed her out of the way to look at the ticket.

"Damn it, Hari, why couldn't you get me one of these! A beautiful island in the Mediterranean with an ancient magical community." She bared her pointed teeth and growled at her friend while Daphne snatched the ticket back.

Pansy came storming into the room, her wand in one hand and sparking alarmingly. "Who the fuck messed with my gun?" she snarled. Several of the younger students dove for cover while the older ones had wands out and were casting defensive spells over themselves and others instinctively.

"I improved it," Hari said, while working a small, wooden cube. "Lower weight, reduced recoil, enlarged magazine, strengthened frame for hotloads, some charms to add extra spin, and just about

anything else I could add without changing the calibre. Oh, and I changed the grips to walnut."

"Oh." Pansy blinked. "The weight is off. I'm going to need to relearn how to move now. And shoot, if the recoil's changed."

"Let me know if the modifications I made to the barrel work. I experimented with using alternating magnetic fields to add extra speed to compensate for the size of the round."

Pansy began to regard her gun with a mixture of interest and dread. gingerly, she began to go through some of the drills Hari had taught her. Normal gun-safety would suggest that doing this in a room full of people was a bad idea, but for one thing, she was trained by Professor Potter. For another, so were the rest of the people in the room, who promptly vacated the vicinity to allow her space.

Hermione sighed. "Hari. Are you saying you made a railgun?"

"Only if it works."

Hermione threw her hands up in the air and left the room to store her precious new book. Hari put the finishing touches on the cube, frowned, and incinerated the wood with a glance, then he drew out another cube from his pocket and began to engrave it again.

"So," said Blaise, who was apparently putting off his hatred of Hari for the moment. "Does anyone know what Christmas breakfast will look like with near to the whole school in attendance?"

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The Great Hall had been redecorated overnight. Since Professor Potter had been busy putting finishing touches on a present or two, the faculty had been able to work unmolested and without his usual 'help'. There were Christmas trees everywhere, each bedecked with

tiny candles and inhabited by fairies who were flitting about, sprinkling ornamental snow over the area. Several miles of garlands were strung from just about every surface starting at a height of ten feet above the ground and with the liberal use of sticking charms, it was a very thorough coverage.

"As we all know, Christmas is a time for family," announced Dumbledore, dressed in an absurdly large fake belly and a santa clause outfit which included a set of actual reindeer wandering around behind the Head Table, nibbling at things and leaving droppings. "Since your houses are your family, it makes sense for you to spend it with your houses. Or you could just ignore that and spend time with your friends. I'm going to go enjoy some more of Professor Potter's bountiful supply of whiskey-laced lemon drops."

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Hari sat, surrounded by his friends, taking a rare moment of quiet enjoyment; despite having to make constant allowances for their flaws and personality defects, he nevertheless was glad of them in his life. There was something soothing about the general background chatter of the school, of Daphne's soft murmuring as she conferred with others, collecting gossip she thought was exclusively collected in herself, Tracy humming a tune from last night as she discussed lingerie with Millie of all people, even the bickering of Hermione being embarrassed by something Blaise said, it all blended together in a pleasing way.

Krum and Fleur had joined them, Krum sitting beside Millie and giving her a thorough kiss. "Thanks, Professor Potter," he said when he came up for air.

"Dare I ask what Hari did this time?" Daphne said. She had a wary expression on her face.

"He gave me a voucher for one set of tattoos, usable when Millie comes of age!" Krum grinned at the girl next to him. "Not that anything can improve on perfection, of course."

"Hari, what is this?" Fleur held out a ring. "Because when a woman gets a ring, it normally has a particular meaning."

"It's a poisoner detection ring."

"I'm immune to most poisons and potions," she responded dryly.

"Yeah. But that's not what the ring does! It detects poisoners. Try it."

Fleur shrugged and drew a vial out of her robes, letting two drops of purple liquid fall into her cup, which sizzled furiously and began to throw out droplets that ate through the table. The rest of Slytherin looked on as she proceeded to knock back the whole thing. "Now what?" she asked as greenish smoke curled from her lips and nostrils.

"See how the sapphire is glowing?"

"Yeah."

"That means a new poisoning or potion attempt has been detected. Now will the ring show you the one responsible."

A glowing image of Fleur formed out of wisps of magic, floating above the gem in the ring. Below its feet was her full name, beside it was a detailed breakdown of the date, time, location, and type of poison. Above the figure was a string of numbers. "Apparition coordinates?" Fleur asked.

"Yeah."

"Wow."

"Yeah. I had some time left, though. So I added a few more features. Go walk to the entryway and will it to call up a list of poisonings and pick the one."

The group watched as Fleur rose and walked to the giant double doors. She came back quickly a moment or two later. "It tracks the poisoner?" she demanded.

"Mhmm. I think it should work for anywhere on the planet. I'm not sure how many incidents it can record, but I used the same principles as I did for Pansy's gift a couple years ago and we haven't worked out the cap on that one yet."

"Hari..." Hermione sighed.

"Did I break a rule again?" he asked politely.

"No, I don't think so. If someone had thought of the things you do, I'm sure there would have been a rule for you to break, but this is new territory."

The group turned around at the sound of a clearing throat. Sasori cocked his head. "I trust you are being diligent in attending to my task. The first round concludes at the end of the month."

Krum smacked his head with his hand and then leaned over and whispered to Hari, who shrugged and nodded. Krum dragged Millie from the Hall.

"Professor Headmaster?" called Hari.

Dumbledore let out a drunken hiccup and looked around sleepily.
"Yesh?"

"Krum is taking Millie with him to Paris as part of the first of Uncle Sasori's tasks."

Dumbledore waved a hand dismissively and proceeded to take a deep pull from a bottle of gin he had acquired.

"I'm not sure why he's going to Paris," Hari murmured to Fleur. "Last I heard, our agents are in Chile." The demihuman shrugged. "Was there any leg of the task so far even in Europe?"

"I don't think so."

"Huh."

"You have *agents*?" Daphne hissed.

"My father is important in the French government and the international community," was Fleur's explanation. Hari just stared at Daphne until she threw her hands up in the air and stormed out of the Hall, muttering.

"You seriously have agents?" Hermione asked. "Like *agents* agents?"

Hari turned to Fleur and engaged her in a discussion of exotic poisons and their sources throughout the muggle world.

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"Professor Potter," Snape's voice was almost amused. "I will thank you not to help a certain man of our mutual acquaintance in his attempts to get me to branch out in subjects of study, even if it involves being given some of the rarest, seminal works on the matter."

"They were basic treatises, so I figured he didn't need them any more."

Snape took a moment to process that statement and then covered his face with his hands and walked back to the Head Table where Professor MacG was nursing her hangover after drinking rather a lot the night before. She had not been amused to find a collar with a

large bell on it waiting for her in the morning, but it hadn't attacked her, so that was something.

Alastor Moody was having a wonderful morning, sitting and staring at the gift from Professor Potter, wielding ever more obscure detection charms to ensure that there wasn't anything untoward within.

X

X

"So the time comes to present the subject of the race." Sasori was seated behind a desk, watching the four champions with a gaze as steady as a statue's. "So, who got it in the end?"

Hari grinned slightly as he pulled a small floppy disk from his pocket and placed it on the table. "I gather it was a near thing in the end," he said to Fleur by way of consolation. "Just a bit of a scuffle for the prize."

"I heard," she scowled. "I'm not sure if I would call three French citizens dead a 'scuffle'."

"Is it up to three?" Hari asked, his tone conversational. "Last I had heard, it was two and a critically-wounded."

Krum was smiling to himself as he lounged in a chair, observing the discussion with every sign of amusement. Girl-Tobi approached the desk and dropped a floppy disk on it.

It was identical to the one Hari had produced.

X

X

--OMAKE--

"So it turns out that the rumors that the Six-Tails was in Mist was a decoy intended to lure Hidan and Kakuzu," Zetsu was sitting at the table with the newly reduced Akatsuki, reviewing recent news. "From what I can gather, both are now dead."

"Dead?" asked Konan. "How can Hidan be dead?"

"Permanently incapacitated then," the black side offered. "Kakuzu is definitely dead. Apparently Hatake Kakashi was used as a distraction."

"An S-class assassin was used as a *distraction*?" demanded Pein.

"Uh-huh," chirped the white half of the plant-man. "Apparently he was taken out by the head of the Uchiha clan."

All eyes turned to Itachi. "What?"

X

X

Tobi, Pein, and Konan sat in a somewhat smaller meeting area.

"What the hell is going on?" demanded Tobi, his voice metallic and cold.

"I have no idea. But it's getting increasingly hard to run an organization when I lose personnel like this."

(A/N John)

We've got another chapter up. I'm torn. I think I'll be working on *Itachi* for a while so we can wrap up Fourth Year.

(A/N 2 John)

We're going to be working a little more slowly again soon, so just be warned. Still, no reason not to enjoy it while it lasts.

Runed Ruins

Chapter 94: Runed Ruins

"And so we welcome back those of our number who had kindly graced us with their absence for the winter holidays. What little peace that brought is now coming to an end." Dumbledore glared at the students. "I am sure you are all eager to get to breakfast and I am eager to send several people to Egypt. It should be entertaining."

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The four champions gathered in the lounge, waiting for the judges to come.

"Any ideas on the task?" Hari asked.

"Tombs," said Fleur. "Why else send us to Egypt."

Krum shuddered. "An unknown length of time in a place with baking sun. Joy. I am made for cold and snow."

The judges entered the room, Dumbledore holding eight lengths of rope.

"The task is simple," said Madame Maxime. "You are all being sent to the Valley of Kings. You have one week in which to acquire an object from the tomb you arrive at. Once you have succeeded, or one week is over, you will use the second portkey to go to a second tomb. You are to reactivate and restore its traps after placing an object you find suitable in a location to be found by someone who manages to bypass the defenses."

"Any questions?" Percy asked as Dumbledore distributed pairs of ropes to each champion.

"These will activate in five seconds," explained Dumbledore.

"We only have two portkeys here," Krum said. "Does one of them have a second charge to get us home?"

"No," replied Dumbledore, cheerfully. "Getting back is part of the task. And I should mention we haven't exactly cleared this with the Egyptian government, magical or otherwise." The portkeys triggered.

X

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Dumbledore smiled genially at Alastor when the retired madman took a seat beside him for a late luncheon. Most of the castle were off at classes at the moment, but what with one thing and another, he'd had to deal with work before food and was now catching up on the lost meal. At three days into the task proposed by Madame Maxime and the Supreme Mugwump had yet to hear a complaint from anyone. It was a remarkably peaceful time. Then things caught up with him. "Alastor?"

"Yeah?" the auror was dishing food from a satchel onto a plate.

"What are you doing here? You have a class to teach right now."

"No I don't; I only do that as a substitute."

"Professor Potter is on an assignment in Egypt, Alastor."

"Huh. Then who do you suppose is teaching my class of Firsties the finer points of evisceration?" Moody watched the rapidly retreating form of the Headmaster and shrugged. Albus got himself worked up over the strangest things.

X

X

Hari didn't look up from his precise work on the screaming man chained to the desk. "We'll continue in a moment, I just need to talk to the Headmaster; in the meantime, Volens, see if you can locate the spleen. What can I do for you, Headmaster?"

"You're supposed to be in Egypt."

"And?"

"You're in Scotland."

"I'm commuting to work."

"I feel as if you're not taking this task seriously."

"Possibly. No, that's a kidney-there's another one just like it on the other side. Pay attention to those kinds of things. If you'll excuse me, Headmaster?"

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The judges were gathered in Dumbledore's office, once again reviewing the options for how to score the whole mess of a task that should have been easy evaluate.

"I think, Igor, that it's clear that Krum loses this round. There was no attempt made to extract the first object, let alone an effort to guard the other tomb." Dumbledore spoke with a mild tone and a hint of chiding to his words. "The problem seems to be Professor Potter's conduct."

"The defenses put up are utterly alien and hellishly secure and your first thought is that a young man devised them?" asked Madame Maxime.

"Yes."

"We could always call Hari in here and just ask him," suggested Sasori. "That would speed this whole matter up significantly."

"It probably would." Most of the room yelped and spun to see Professor Potter sitting on a windowsill, his back resting against the thick stone and a long needle spinning between his fingers, having caught it when his Uncle launched it at him to make sure he stayed on his toes. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Did you tamper with your competitors' runework at the second site?"

"No."

"Well..." began Karkaroff.

"I fixed it."

"What do you mean 'fixed'?" demanded Madame Maxime.

"They'd made some mistakes and forgotten a few things, so I put them in."

"Hari..." Sasori closed his eyes. Times like this, he wished he had enough biological remnants of himself to sigh properly. "Was that in the mission parameters?"

"No..."

"Then should you have done it?"

"They had made mistakes!"

"Should you have done it?"

"No..."

"Well, that deals with a second competitor, then," Sasori said with a bit of cheer. "It looks like Hari is disqualified for actions outside the explicit instructions of the task." He directed a dark look at his

nephew. "Perhaps you'll remember in the future that you are to fulfill the assigned task, not what you feel the task should have been."

"It does my heart good to see a judge who remains impartial enough to criticize his champion," Dumbledore smiled, though there was a slightly razored edge to it as he turned it on his fellow Headmasters.

"So we're left with how to judge runework we can't get access and observe; the rules have many contingencies, but not for being unable to even inspect the result of the task. Besides," said Percy. "I'm not sure how having to do that for two people instead of just the one is much of an improvement. Speaking of which... Professor Potter, were your efforts in an attempt to aid your competition?"

"I guess?"

Percy pulled a sheaf of notes from his pocket and skimmed them a few times. "That solves that," Percy declared brightly. "It looks like the remaining two champions are disqualified for receiving outside help."

"That's the whole scoring problem solved, then," said Dumbledore. "For the sake of armchair judging, though, Professor Potter, how would you describe the work of your competition prior to your... assistance?"

"Fleur's work was pedestrian, but shows signs of potential—"

"*Pedestrian?*" demanded Madame Maxime. "Mademoiselle Delacour has won awards for her rune work. The Goblins are headhunting her for their curse-breaking and curse-laying divisions straight out of school!"

"That doesn't change the quality of her work, Madame," replied Hari. "It was passable and might even have worked against anyone who wasn't ready to break into an Egyptian tomb. I'm not sure how to estimate Girl-Tobi's work, though. As best as I can tell-without going back in time to examine the tomb as it was, mind you-there were

only the original defenses active when I got there. The closest way I can think of to describe it is that it looked like someone had just reactivated the tomb's entire array. In light of Uncle Sasori's point, Girl-Tobi would probably win. Do you need me for anything? Only I left my Second Year class practicing with their knives and I should show them a few tricks before the end of the period."

X

X

"Albus, why on earth did you bring in one of the champions to evaluate the work of other champions?"

"In part because Professor Potter probably never considered lying."

"To my shame." Sasori muttered.

"And mostly because he's probably the youngest Runes Master in recorded history. Certainly the most accomplished for his age." Dumbledore smiled at the goggling faces and smiled beatifully. "Did I forget to mention that? I'd forget my head if it weren't attached."

X

X

"How could we all be disqualified?" demanded Fleur. She sat beside Hari at the Slytherin table, Krum was busily necking with Millie, who had gone missing for two weeks.

"Well, technically Viktor wasn't disqualified. He just got a zero."

"Fine. But why was *I* disqualified?"

"For receiving outside help."

Fleur's expression turned from indignant to outraged. "They question my abilities?" Her voice was a little harder to understand as fires

began to collect around her tongue and in her hands.

"Not at all. Madame Maxime even defended your work when I mentioned it was pedestrian."

"*Pedestrian?*"

"Yes. Nothing to be ashamed of. You've got potential."

"*Potential?*"

"Are you just going to repeat everything I say?"

"How was it '*pedestrian*'?"

"You had the power runes spaced wrong. It was inefficient and you wasted a good deal of space on your arrays. They weren't bad, but they could use some extra twists to avoid being so like the formulaic ones out of textbooks. In a bunch of places you had managed to get a fairly accurate interpretation of the original defense, but you were forced to patch it. And you have a rather limited collection of runes you draw on. From what I can tell, you favor Egyptian, a bit of Norse, and little else."

Fleur's mouth dropped open. She had been expecting a rather more flippant response from Hari. Even sitting in his classes for several months, she knew that he was usually irreverent. To hear him suddenly serious and giving a completely straight evaluation of her abilities was a bit of a shock, possibly more than what could have been considered a scathing review thereof.

"My Uncle *did* point out that we were only supposed to be reactivating the tombs' defenses, so you can probably be forgiven for the heavy reliance on Egyptian runes, but your vocabulary there is clearly limited if you needed to draw on European runes to fill in gaps. That also excuses the lack of innovation, but the original work was so flawed, even when limited to just Egyptian rune schema, that

it was hardly worth reactivating. There's a reason that those defenses were down, after all."

Fleur blinked. "What? How?"

"I might have gone in and fixed up your work. I didn't add any of my own stuff, but I tightened up the schema, fixed up the patch jobs, and got it looking a little more like it should have."

"You did what?"

"If I recall, he has his Mastery already." Pansy decided to interject so that things didn't get into a circular discussion.

"He does?"

"I think so. Right, Hari?"

"I guess? I think that it was the gift I made for the Headmaster. I don't get why; it wasn't anything special. Just a perpetual candy. It was more a proof-of-concept than anything. I mean, it works, but still."

"Perpetual?"

"Yeah. If I remember correctly, it transformed saliva into sweetness and used the conversion to power the whole thing."

Fleur shook her head. "I should not be surprised by this, but somehow I am." She considered the young man who had returned to his book once it appeared that his friends were content to talk amongst themselves. "Teach me." When Hari didn't respond, she poked his shoulder. "Hari? Teach me runes."

"I guess? Like I said: you have potential. Be in the Slytherin Common Room at eleven every night."

"You'll want to get Professor Snape to set you up with a room in the Slytherin dorms." Hermione remembered what it was like at the end of a lesson. "There is *no* way you want to drag yourself out of the

dungeons at four in the morning. Aside from curfew, you'll want to do nothing but go to sleep."

"Four in the morning?" Fleur couldn't help the incredulous tone.

"That's an estimate," Hermione admitted. "It frequently runs longer. It depends on whether Hari's students make progress." At Fleur's questioning expression, she explained. "Hari is teaching wandless magic to a few people at a time." She shrugged. "I won't say it doesn't work, but it involves a lot of late nights."

Madam Pince stormed over and began delivering a stern (if rather soft) lecture on the need to maintain silence in the Library and how it was completely unacceptable that Mademoiselle Delacour had used both that volume and those words in a place where children studied.

(A/N John)

It has come to my attention that people were wondering when we would publish more of *Itachi* . The answer is: now.

(A/N 2 John)

Between real life and Spoon constantly talking me into discussing new ideas, we haven't gotten much writing done for a while now. We've been heavily relying on having a small buffer. Sadly, I need to replenish that.

(A/N 3 John)

The problem is that we have so many ideas which need writing. We'll get to them eventually.

(A/N 4 John)

Not much else to say here, really.

The Task II

Chapter 95: The Task II

"It's not fair," Tracy grumbled at breakfast. She was showing the strain of seven months without a good night's sleep. She was also glaring at Fleur, who was having a meal with every sign of poise and not a hair out of place. "How come she doesn't look like hell?"

"Veela." Daphne's reply was blunt and to the point.

"She does look like hell," added Viktor from his spot beside Millie. The two of them had shown up a day after the task in Egypt had ended, both of them sporting mild tans and speaking poorly accented French.

Everyone at the table rolled their eyes.

X

X

Despite having a full course-load and still attending a few classes, Hari was making use of Shadow Clones to get around the problems of time. He was nearly certain that he could use his Wood Release, but without more information on how it was to be used, he was still guessing. In retrospect, he should have looked that up when he was raiding Leaf's stockpile of forbidden knowledge. He wasn't sure why they had banned the super-zombie technique, but he put it down to them being squeamish.

The Hari corner had been enlarged (something that everyone privately thought was supposed to be impossible) and there were a pair of projects going along now. Three if they counted to large tree that had put down roots through the stone floor and pushed its way through the ceiling. No one had felt up to questioning Professor Potter about it, though and he hadn't said a word. The cauldron on

the Common Room fire bubbled merrily at all hours as Hari tended to it.

Several of the larger dungeon areas were completely barred. One of them had plenty of hazard markings around the only known entrance (Sasori preferred not to be interrupted); the rest were simply impossible to access except by magical transportation. Between them, the two ninja had taken over most of the space in the dungeons, but since they tended to be unused, it wasn't much of an issue.

X

X

The dawn of February Twenty-Fourth was one of the coldest on record, which meant that Dumbledore was grinning broadly as he announced that the entire school was to be out around the lake for the morning. Some of the more cynical students were muttering that this was probably his fault, which he did nothing to dissuade by reminding everyone that magic was forbidden in the tournament area so as not to interfere with the spells used by the champions. It didn't help that he'd shown up to breakfast wearing several layers of ski-gear and what looked like an entire caribou skin. His cackle when he noted that included conjured items was just the icing on the cake.

X

X

The champions gathered on the shore of the Black Lake with Percy, who was also dressed rather warmly. "You all know what the task is," he said, his breath not merely steaming but some of it actually turned to ice and clattered to the frozen ground.

"I don't," chirped Girl-Tobi, steam pouring from around her mask. She was wearing her usual garments and seemed utterly indifferent to the cold.

"Oh." Percy seemed a little flummoxed and then realized he probably should have expected. "You have someone important to you at the bottom of the lake. If you don't rescue them in an hour, they die."

"Huh. So who's mine?"

Percy paused. "I believe it's my youngest brother. And Professor Potter's hostage is my little sister. So I would appreciate it if you please rescue them."

X

X

"What were you talking about, Weasley?" hissed Karkaroff when the young man had returned to the judge-bunker which was a thermal tent around a large fire. "Was it necessary to tell them that they die instead of just never coming back?"

"I taught my students to tell the truth, Igor," chided Dumbledore.

"What?"

"Any hostage still hostage at the end of the hour will be executed." Dumbledore smiled. "I felt it would add a sense of urgency."

X

X

"Aaaand they're off!" Lee Jordan's voice boomed through the megaphone as the four champions each enacted their own plans. "Viktor Krum is-yes, he's taking off his robes. In this weather! I do believe he's just jumped headfirst into the water. Good grief, is he even human? That has to be a miserable experience."

"I do believe that the lovely Mademoiselle Delacour has created a boat and floated her way out to the middle of the lake. Shame she's not stripping down-Sorry, Professor. I think she's conjured a couple

of metallic spheres and has begun to do something that involves sitting still.

"Speaking of sitting still, Professor Potter has pulled out what I think is a kukri and is inscribing it with runes. Is he going to even try?" Lee Jordan paused. "Where is Girl-Tobi? Did anyone see her?"

X

X

"Does anyone else think this was a poor spectator event?" called Lee Jordan. "I mean, we can't really see anything but the end. Why not at least wait in the nice, comparatively warm castle while we waited?" He looked at Professor McGonagall, but the woman had a look of anger on her face that made him think she was wondering the same thing. Through gritted teeth, she was growling a series of unkind words about Dumbledore to warm the heart of any dark wizard.

X

X

Half an hour after the start of the task, Tam Riddle dragged herself to the shore, her eyes narrowed as she stalked over to Hari, her magic flaring around her and leaving a trail of steaming water. "Why did you leave me down there?"

"I have every confidence in your abilities," he replied mildly and turned the dagger over to begin working on the other side.

Tam's scream of rage echoed around the grounds.

X

X

Fleur watched the shore. She'd known she wasn't going to win this task. The downside to the increase in her fires was that she was even less comfortable in water, though the cold was barely even noticeable. Instead, she'd focused on taking out some aggression on the Merfolk. To that end, she had two balls of iron which were slowly going from cherry-red to blazing white as their cores were filled with increasingly unstable levels of fire magic.

X

X

McGonagall's grumbles had died down a bit, but she had browbeat several students into cutting down trees and building her a bonfire, as she was unable to wear winter coats and someone had forgotten to expect arctic temperatures when crafting her garb-something she was resolved to mention to their creator at the next... she stomped off towards the shore, tail flicking angrily.

X

X

That looked about right. Fleur let the molten ball of iron fall into the water, where it began to hiss as it left behind a trail of cooling metal. She'd done the math a couple of times and was pretty sure she'd gotten it right, but if she ended up being wrong, it wasn't like anyone important was going to be hurt. She clenched her empty hand.

X

X

There was a flash of blinding light from the lake and moments later, a geyser of water burst into the air, boiling into steam as it did so. "What in the hell did she do?" muttered Tam as she relaxed in a winter coat she'd forced one of the younger students to give her while she listened to Minnie unleash a verbal tirade at Hari. So far,

she felt that the woman had a good point, though it was a bit hard to pay complete attention when it was causing her to breathe deeply. Eventually, it finally clicked what the woman was saying and she rose, tossed the coat from her shoulders around McGonagall's and fled.

X

X

Fleur pulled a speaking tube from her pocket and shoved it into the water. She knew her accent was horrible, but it would probably do. And besides, after her little demonstration, it shouldn't be hard to understand. Lo and behold, not five minutes later, she had a shivering Gabrielle in her boat, huddled around the other ball of molten iron and was sending the boat scudding along towards the shore.

X

X

Hari nodded and pulled out a notebook. "Alright. I think I can do that when I make the conversion. Adding things is easy enough, it's taking things out that's tricky. I assume you'd prefer 'comfortable temperature' to be a constant?"

"At will temperature control would be better. Maybe able to turn it off. Being warm isn't the same as a nice fire."

"Alright then. Have you picked out a design yet? I already told you the total number of square inches I need. It's up to you how you want them arranged."

"I... have been considering some ideas." The woman flushed slightly. "I do not really have any knowledge of the matter. Most magicals do not."

"Interesting. Tell you what: give me the designs you've thought up and I'll get a couple of consultants."

"Consultants?"

"People who care about this sort of thing."

X

X

Viktor Krum grabbed hold of Millie and began to strike out for the surface. It had been easy enough to get his girlfriend; the Merfolk had been distracted by something. He'd had to smack one or two of them a few times, but he'd been prepared for a full-on war. He hadn't expected to win, but it would be nice not to come in last place.

X

X

"And there's Viktor Krum, emerging from the water with Millicent Bulstrode. He's making a good go of coming in third." Lee gave a wolf-whistle as he saw that Fleur had taken off her admittedly light cloak and put it around her sister's shoulders. Then there was the explosion.

X

X

Gabrielle looked at his sister's arms with an expression of disgust and contempt. "Muzzer will be sad to learn she was right," she declared. "Coming to 'angland 'as turned you into a degenerate 'ore."

Fleur's shriek of rage was followed by her leaping at Professor Potter, her hands extended into claws and flames licking from her mouth and eyes. "You bastard!" she snarled as she flew directly through the space he had occupied, caught herself on a taloned

hand and turned, coiling her legs and extending them to launch her back the other way as they touched the ground.

"I've offered to fix it," Hari said calmly. He reached out and grabbed a wrist, turning his body to send what had been a controlled pounce into a dive landing in the lake. That was followed by a sound that was less in keeping with a bird and more like a cat which had just been dunked.

When Fleur emerged, her anger had gone from blazing to an inferno as the white dress she wore was only obscuring her body by virtue of the steam curling around her. She stormed over to Gabrielle, sank her claws into the ball of iron which was still glowing and then snarled as she used a hammer throw to toss it into the middle of the lake, watching the hissing as it sank below the surface with a certain degree of satisfaction.

"What is the lovely Dela..." Lee Jordan broke off as there was a brilliant flash once again and then a new gush of steam blew upwards as superheated water made contact with cool air. "Well then, all that remains is to wait out the last thirty seconds of the task. Has anyone seen Miss Girl-Tobi?"

The stadium was treated to a girlish scream when the reply came from right beside him. "Right here, Mister Jordan."

X

X

Almost a minute later, Dumbledore and the rest of the judges were in the booth next to Lee Jordan, pointing out to Girl-Tobi that she'd condemned her hostage by not rescuing him.

"What hostage, Professor Headmaster?"

"Ronald Weasley!"

"Why would I rescue him?"

"I was given to understand you're somewhat fond of your battles."

"I am, Professor. I meant that he's over there."

They whirled, spotting the redhead in question in the crowd beside Neville Longbottom, cheering the end of the chilly task and eagerly looking forwards to classes indoors.

X

X

==OMAkE==

Uchiha Sasuke considered the notes in his hand. One was the regular note from Naruto, keeping him up to date on the various forms of hell the acting head of the clan was raising in the name of progress. Reading between the lines, Naruto had begun to hire some of the various missing-nin he encountered on the extended travels to act as replacements for the Leaf's military police force. It was hard to tell if the ANBU were glad to have the workload reduced, or worried that the parties enforcing the law internally and handling some amount of security were all wanted criminals on the payroll of a clan that some still distrusted. That made Sasuke smile, at least. It was the little things that amused him.

The second note was also from Naruto, but was written in code. Even without encryption, it was almost unreadable. Since Naruto had never been one for poetry or classical literature, the only explanation was that it was an extra layer of obfuscation.

Infinite is the help man may yield unto man-again;

Who so servith that morning which steals upon the night and its darkness melts

Creeps upon him a malady on his heart medicine unreaching

Bodily strength serve the conscious thought yet acts as judge for reason

The hour approaches for Janus to pass a torch for Asclepius has no aid for him.

Prepare a lambskin for thyself and sharpen the lupines for a fretted role .

Sasuke shook his head. That was nearly impossible to understand. He wondered how much time Naruto had spent with various scrolls to work out how to make it so oblique that Sasuke wasn't really sure he'd understood the whole thing. He drew his sword and ran a whetstone along its length.

(A/N John)

I wish we had more time to write these days, but we don't. When Spoon got well after the flu, I promptly fell sick myself. That was fun. Spent the whole weekend asleep.

(A/N 2 John)

Hard to say much more than that, really. We've got stuff taking up our time in life, plus Spoon likes to talk my ear off about ideas she's come up with instead of letting me write. That gets in the way, as well.

(A/N 3 John)

As to the chapter... I wish the second task could have been longer, but the fact remains that the task just isn't that challenging. And Girl-Tobi is one again doing her thing of ignoring details that most of us consider important. Like reality.

Calahari

Chapter 96: Calahari

"Thank you for this, Mademoiselle Delacour," Draco's voice was somewhat waspish as he stared at their dinner. Having declared that it was 'Mademoiselle Delacour's generosity' which had provided the bounty, Dumbledore had delivered the prize to the Slytherin table. This was why the table was now in splinters, the magically reinforced wood crushed under the weight of the entire giant squid.

"At least it hasn't started to rot." Daphne didn't sound much more thrilled to be faced with eating a creature possessed of tentacles.

"It isn't cooked properly," snapped Fleur.

"True," Hari prodded the giant cephalopod with his chopsticks. "I don't think the House Elves know how to prepare it anyway. I've kept them to local fish."

"And they call us barbarians," Malfoy whispered to Tracy.

"You are." Fleur glared at the squid. Her sister had listened to the offer of lunch and dinner prepared in an English kitchen and promptly fled for home via floo. "What are you doing?" The last part was to Hari, who had transfigured a portion of the floor into a long trench which promptly filled with liquid. "Oh." Two more trenches had appeared, the first filled with white powder and the second with white liquid. "I'll get the temperature?"

"Sure." Hari tapped the stone trench with clear fluid in it, the stone becoming black and metallic.

Fleur shoved a hand into what she was unsurprised to find was oil and conjured some of her annoyance at her sibling, quickly bringing it to a boil.

The entire Hall watched as Hari severed a tentacle, dredged it, soaked it, dredged it again and finally placed it in the oil where it hissed and spat gobs of scalding oil which students dodged with the results of long practice.

"Does anyone know how he gets the House Elves to do what he wants?" muttered Pansy as Hari levitated the giant, crisped limb from the oil and set it floating in the air to cool and drain. A few moments later, a squad of the little creatures came troup ing into the Hall, surrounded the giant squid, and trotted back out, squeaking about ice houses.

"So that just happened," Snape said to Minerva as Hari began to slice up the meal and dish it out to Slytherin.

X

X

"Thank you for joining us." Dumbledore relaxed in his chair. "In the commotion yesterday, I do believe we forgot to actually score the champions. I guess that having to dispose of several hundred corpses belonging to sentient creatures can do that to a body. We've had to dig a new disappointment pit."

"The scores?" prompted Viktor, who was eager to return to his girlfriend and their break between classes.

"Well, Professor Potter and Miss Girl-Tobi both get zeroes," Dumbledore stated. "Neither of them actually completed the task. Mademoiselle Delacour, you get a zero for completely depopulating my lake. Mister Krum gets twenty-five points in the form of two tens, a five, and two zeroes. I'll leave it to your imagination to guess who voted which way. In the meantime, I believe that Mister of-the-Red-Sands has another little job for you."

"Yes," Sasori melted out of the shadows. "A competition this time." He sighed as his nephew began to grin. "With the stipulation that

there be no deaths." The grin vanished. "You will get your briefing tomorrow."

The next morning, three owls winged their way into the Great Hall and landed in front of Girl-Tobi, Fleur, and Krum.

"Shouldn't you be getting one of these?" Krum asked.

"I don't see why."

X

X

Arnold took the note out of the owl's claws, skimmed it, and sighed. At least they had been on break for a week this time. He picked up the phone. "Get me Kirkbane."

X

X

Sirius Black groaned as the fireturkey landed on the headboard of his oversized bed. He didn't want to deal with anything other than getting another hour of two of sleep in before digging into the potion stock with the three women strewn over his body. Still, that was his godson's bird and the boy had a knack for amusement. As such, he extracted one hand from where it had been comfortably lodged and took the scrap of paper. A minute later, he was down the hall, hammering on Remus's door.

The werewolf growled something rude before greeting the grinning bastard whom he promptly socked in the face. From behind him, there was a soft sound of complaint as his companion noticed that her bedwarmer was not, in fact, warming the chilly air nearby. Despite Sirius's attempts, he had been unable to get Remus to go for the orgy life-which was probably for the best, since the werewolf

was in charge of doing anything that resembled real work and just told Sirius which way to vote.

"If this isn't good, I'm going to gut you the way I should have when you decided that *coitus interruptus* was a hilarious way of finishing my first sexual encounter."

"It is, I swear!"

"Well? I do believe that I have someone behind me who would rather that I spend my time before breakfast in pursuits other than standing here naked." The upside to having lived with the Marauders for seven years was that one became rather stripped of self-consciousness by being stripped of everything else far too often.

"I'm being called in as a consultant!"

"Dear Merlin. Who would hire you to consult anything? The only skill you have is... did you get hired by a magazine on prostitution?"

Sirius grinned. "Better than that."

"Oh boy." Remus looked over his shoulder. "Just a moment, luv. We don't need the red cape." He turned back. "What is it?"

"I'm being asked to help tattoo Mc-Double-Gs!"

x

x

"What're you two doing?" Tam's question came from directly behind Tracy's shoulder.

The girl yelped and threw some paper over what she had been working on. Beside her, Millie slammed her own book shut and glowered in a way that would have been scarier to someone who wasn't Tam Riddle.

"This is the third week now that when you two finish your homework, you join heads and take a corner of the Common Room. Hari can get away with that." She glanced at the enlarged Potter Corner with its large tree and walls covered in seemingly random scribble. "But others like corner seats."

"You should get them sooner," Tracy replied primly. Then she shrieked when both herself and Millie, along with their papers, were flung bodily out of the corner by invisible force. Their training meant that they turned the falls into landings that had them in combat readiness, but Tam was already seated in her favorite armchair with a shimmering barrier of green energy around her and a book in her hands.

X

X

"Hari." Fleur's voice was flat. "Care to explain this?" she threw a piece of parchment at him.

"It appears to be something written in French." Hari frowned. "Are you suffering from a loss of reading abilities? I didn't think that was a possible side-effect, but..."

"No!" her apparently fragile hold on her temper was lost. "This is a letter detailing a number of persons who are current imprisoned for various charges across the planet!"

He blinked. "Okay?" Hari turned back to Tam. "I'm serious. I have a project that could use your insight. I have an expert on the matter already, but you've got a bit of specialization in the matter."

"Are you sure?"

Fleur slammed a hand on the Slytherin table (newly replacing the giant squid, which was still on the menu a week later. Calamari had become a staple of the Slytherin diet by virtue of necessity),

scorching the woodwork. "They are people who work for me!
Assigned to the task!"

Hari looked over the list in his Sharingan's memory and then faced the demihuman. "So?"

"You had my agents arrested!"

X

X

Arnold glanced over the report in his hand and began to snicker. Sometimes he loved this job.

X

X

"I don't think I did." Hari's expression was thoughtful. "No. I don't remember doing anything like that." He nodded with finality. "Not me. So, Tam, are you at least willing to hear me out on what the project is?"

"And yet," Fleur bit out. "Somehow every single one of them is in a prison! In countries without friendly ties to France!"

Hari blanched.

X

X

Arnold read the letter in his hand and proceeded to hit his head on his papers several times. Then he picked up the phone and cursed soundly and with variety up until the call was answered. "Non-lethal means that they shouldn't be facing execution either!" he snarled before slamming down the receiver.

X

X

"Does this mean that there are more than three tasks?"

"Yep." Hari shrugged. "I'm guessing that there'll be four more. We already had one in Egypt and then this is the second assignment from my Uncle."

"What does he have you doing?"

"Treasure hunt."

"Is it hard?"

"Not really. Just long."

"Could be worse," Blaise said as he poured himself some tea. "He could have told you to rob Gringotts. It's never been done."

Hari perked up. "Never been done?" He glanced over at his uncle, then trotted to the Head Table for a short conversation followed by the pair exiting the Great Hall.

Tracy recalled a line that seemed most appropriate at this moment. "I see nothing! I was not here! I did not even get up this morning!" She looked around. "Which explains why Draco isn't at lunch."

X

X

Everyone was relieved to see Hari at dinner. He was beaming in a way that made them uncomfortable, but he'd been teaching classes all afternoon.

"Dear lord," muttered Hermione as she stared at the headline of the *Daily Prophet*. "At least we know where Hari was yesterday."

"I hope," muttered Daphne.

"What are you talking about?" asked Tracy innocently.

Assault on Gringotts led the page above a picture of a partially demolished pile of rubble that had once been the front of the bank. A dozen dead Goblins lay strewn about and a number of black lines suggested that there were several more who had not managed to escape the episode in one piece.

Below that was a stirring, detailed account of events narrated by someone present which was concocted from interviews by the writer. According to what was declared to be the certain knowledge of the eyewitness penning the story, an unknown person had approached the bank in the middle of the day dressed in a heavy cloak and hunched over. Nothing that was too odd in the magical world, although it was unusual for such a creature to move about in Diagon, especially during the day.

Some time later, there were screams from inside the bank and the sounds of battle and the *Gzthad'drnp* (the warcry of the Goblins which no wizard who had heard it remembered fondly, as it was associated with periods of what could be nicely called 'political upheaval' in the magical world)

The dark figure had come bursting out of the bank, throwing something behind it which had exploded, sending the roof and front of the bank collapsing inwards. The aurors had arrived just in time to end up in the second wave of explosions which had killed or crippled almost half of the veteran aurors who arrived and severely injured all of the trainees and probationary ones.

Hari grinned. "I think he got stalled by the carts."

"It says here that the Goblins haven't been able to account for all their people yet," Hermione murmured.

"There were consolation prizes." Sasori's flat voice drew their attention to the youthful redhead who had wandered over, accompanied by a small, hunched figure wearing a familiar cloak and bearing a rather plain, but well made spear on its back.

Hari was mumbling to himself and scribbling in a notebook. "That reminds me: is anyone interested in some improved Goblin artifacts?"

A/N 1 Spoon

So there's very little real excuse here other than the fact that we would plan to write and something would come up and then suddenly it was the next day. And no writing meant no sending me the next chapter. So yeah.

A/N 2 Spoon

I finally pestered John enough to just send over the next chapter without us sitting down and going over it, since I figured you all would rather read a chapter than wait who knows how long for us to get around to writing again.

A/N 3 Spoon

I came up with the chapter title. Please love it so John doesn't make me change it. Thank you.

We're Baaaack

Chapter 97: We're Ba~ack!

Arnold looked up to see the Boss sitting in the client-chair. "I'm glad you could make it. We just got a big job, but it's not the kind of thing I can give to most of our agents. In fact, the only team I could assign this to are busy on your personal job, so I need you to handle it."

"Cool!"

"We've been hired to deliver the head of the person who robbed Gringotts."

"Wow!" Hari was nearly bouncing in excitement. "Someone else broke into Gringotts?" Arnold stared at his employer for several moments and then put his head in his hands and sighed. "Do we have any leads?"

"Yeah, Boss. You." From the depths of his hands, Arnold continued, "go take a nap or something, Boss? Let me give this some thought."

When Hari returned from wandering around London, relieving passersby of their valuables to kill time, Arnold looked a lot more cheerful.

"It took some work, but I think I have a solution." The smile on Arnold's face was a bit brittle, but it was there. "I do believe the Goblins may have made a mistake in the contract. So here's what we're going to do..."

Ragnok blinked when the Dawn operative walked into his throne room. Considering no one was supposed to know where it was and there were lots of guards and traps to ensure that if someone did learn about the location, they couldn't do anything with it, there was

something disconcerting about the young man strolling through the door.

"Hi. You contracted us to deliver the head of the one who broke into Gringotts, yes?"

"Yes..." while it was always nice to have prompt service, it wasn't supposed to be a surprise.

"Well, here it is." The young man grinned.

"Where?"

"Right here," the operative tossed a rotting head to the ground. It did not look recently dead. In fact, it was less head and more skull. A bit of pallid flesh still clung to it in a few places and strands of greasy hair trailed to the floor. The back of it was a ruin that oozed blackish sludge to the marble floor, where it hissed quietly. "Now I have to get back to work." The operative walked back out the door, waving cheerily at the guards who were rushing down the hall as the alarms triggered.

Arnold looked up to see the Boss sitting across from him holding a sack. "Did it work?"

"Yep. I got you something while I was out."

"Oh?" A bad feeling began to steal over the director pro tem.

"Yeah." Hari placed an ornate, golden claw holding a glass ball on Arnold's desk. "I found a Goblin scrying crystal. I thought it could be useful."

Arnold closed his eyes and whimpered.

Tracy absently dodged a swat from a floating wooden hand. It had somehow detected her lapse in concentration and taken the opportunity to alert her to the same. It was difficult to focus, though, with the conversation going on in the opposite corner of the common room.

"Please don't charge that rune-set; I don't want to flee chlorine gas again."

"e's going to make what? And what do you mean 'again'?"

"But I fixed it. See this inversion fixed the charge."

"Still. I have bad memories of protecting Firsties."

"Well, if we're not going to review past projects, let's look at this. I have here a rough reconstruction of your power-scheme before I fixed it."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Look at all the wasted space."

"Where?"

"Right there." Hari pointed to a spot that appeared to be in use.

"ari, that's a rune."

"Yeah. Why didn't you layer it?"

"Because layered runes are normally post-graduate studies?"

"Why? This is just inefficient. Look, if you give this rune a quarter turn," Hari flicked a finger and ink on parchment began to move like a living thing. "They flow together just fine."

"Why do that, though?" Fleur refused to sound impressed. She didn't need to give him an even greater ego. Besides, it wasn't really

remarkable, given his abilities.

"Saves space. And power, come to think of it. See how I overcharge this rune so that it glows yellow? Now it's ready to be linked to the reservoir. Why are you over there?"

"Because that's about to explode."

"No it's not. Watch. There. Now the whole scheme is powered off one charge. Of course, if I don't do something to close the system, it won't self-sustain, but the Egyptians were good at that. Sometimes it's okay to just crib from the textbooks."

"That addition you're making isn't in textbooks."

"Of course it is. You read Grecian tablets, right?"

"No."

"Non."

"Well, there are some good reproductions of fragments found in Alexandria. A few of the locals had done extensive tomb-robbing and made notes. It's not a good idea to use the whole array that the tombs had, obviously. I mean, look at how many of them got robbed."

"I think it's safe enough. Nothing's exploded. This time."

"THIS TIME?"

And on it went.

"Thank you, Hari."

"Hm?" Hari looked up from the essays he was grading. He could read them all at once, true, but since he couldn't write on them all at once easily, it was a somewhat longer task than he might have

wanted. He was against essays, personally, but Professor Headmaster had explained that it was an important part of the curriculum. Hari had compromised by requiring all students Fourth Year and up to turn in essays written with the humors of a designated target. Many of the students who were headed for honors had thoughtfully included diagrams for the proposed battles and a few had even taken a stab at some of the calculations, leaving diagrams to show angles and arcs. It did the heart good to see students excel.

"You finally had my agents released."

"I did?"

"Yes. Too late to have a chance at the task, but it's something."

"Oh. You're welcome?" Hari cocked his head. "I wonder what took so long?"

"I realize that the words have an obvious meaning, Kirkbane," snarled Arnold into the receiver. "But I'm choosing to assume that you are using some obscure and possibly original alternate version which does not mean that I should look into a way to reach through the phone and strangle you with your own entrails! No! Sod that!" Arnold slammed the phone down and glared at the paperwork on his desk. At least he could get that finished.

There was a general shuddering when the thing flew in the window at breakfast. All the owls were giving it a wide berth, many of them slamming into walls in their haste to avoid contact. Several mid-air battles broke out as talons were used to settle who had to be closer. It landed in front of Professor Potter and leaned back. Some of its substance turned into a wispy head. "Sorry, Boss. It was gone when they got there." Hari's head snapped around to stare at the Head Table, where Girl Tobi was handing Sasori a small package.

"Hn."

"Did you ever get around to suggesting placement?" Tam jumped when Hari's voice came beside her ear.

"No."

"Well, I've heard from my consultant. I expect you to have it ready for class today."

"You're making it *homework* ?"

"If necessary."

Arnold looked up when the Boss flamed into the office, looking somewhat harassed. "Something I can help with, Boss?"

"Maybe. Did we have anything across the pond two days ago?"

Arnold blanched. "What? No!" He shook his head. "We don't take those kinds of jobs, Boss. There are *some* limits. In fact, we had no one anywhere in the States at all for the last week. Sacarissa had a bad feeling, so I pulled everyone not on permanent assignment. The closest agent was in Iowa." He paused. "Why would you even need to ask?"

"Because Hermione was accusing me. I knew *I* didn't do it, but I wanted to check before telling her I had nothing to do with it in general."

"Definitely not. We don't cause *everything* that makes it onto the front page. We've got too many clients who don't want that kind of attention. I only just started returning our agents since I got the all-clear. I'm just glad I had them out for a week or two, if everyone left April 18th, that would have thrown up all sorts of flags to the locals."

"I'll tell her I definitely had nothing to do with it. Thanks."

"No problem, Boss."

Fleur stormed into the Great Hall and over to Hari, who was engrossed in a pile of letters. For the first time in months, she was wearing short sleeves and her arms bore no tattoos. "You did it again!"

"Again?"

"While I was asleep, you did something."

"I inked the concealing scheme." Hari shrugged.

"Without permission. Again."

"You were taking too long."

Dumbledore looked out his window at the grounds. Below, the Second Years were trotting into the Forbidden Forest on what had been marked in the schedule as a practice exam. "Mr. Weasley, can I assume that preparations have not been made?"

"No, Headmaster." Percy was surrounded by parchment and dusty tomes. "I'm fairly certain that we're covered, though."

"That will hardly do."

"I meant us personally, Headmaster."

"That's different. Carry on." There was an explosion from somewhere in the dungeons. It was another day at Hogwarts.

The four competitors were arranged on the lawn near the Black Lake. Each had been handed what was only a broom because it had

a thick part with straw tied to one end. Not a one of the four was straight and the one Girl-Tobi held was actually bent into a circle at the far end. In fact, if they had not come out of the broom shed, it could have been forgiven if they had been thought to be some sort of modern art.

"You have been handed your itinerary," Dumbledore was saying.
"You are to get pictures of yourself at each of the designated locations. This is a race. Go!"

Viktor grabbed Fleur by the hair and flung her into the Lake before taking off on a broom and flying directly into the castle. While Fleur screeched bloody murder and began to generate a cloud of steam, Hari calmly kicked off and started flying in the general direction of London instead of the coast of Norway and the first checkpoint. Girl-Tobi tossed the broom aside and strolled back indoors, unruffled by Krum zooming out inches above her head with Millie clinging to him for dear life as he flew on a Firebolt in a southeasterly direction with all due haste.

The judges watched with varying degrees of amusement as Fleur got to shore, examined the two brooms available, selected one, and took off almost directly east at a speed greater than the broom could normally achieve as she heated the air around her.

"I do hope they're careful," Dumbledore said.

Madam Maxime's expression turned suspicious. "Why?"

"What with all the not-doing-anything I've been doing, I seem to have failed to get permission for this event from the government-from the governments, actually. I don't think it was cleared with anyone. Oh well. The worst that happens is that one of your students spends some time in prison."

"Our students?" demanded Karkaroff.

"Well, Miss Girl-Tobi just went back inside and I think Professor Potter is as likely to serve any prison sentence he is issued as he is to appear for detentions. Well, the worst that happens is that there is an international incident not on my grounds and so not my problem."

"Professor?" Percy said carefully. "I've been meaning to ask about that: aren't you the top man at the ICW?"

"Yes..."

"So if there's an international incident involving magic, that would be something you have to deal with, right?"

Dumbledore stared off into space for so long that they began to wonder if he had slipped into an open-eyed coma. Then he began to swear so explosively that the Black Lake began to develop splotches of red.

"Hello, Boss," Arnold didn't pause as he typed away, writing another memo. It was amazing just how much paperwork one generated running a mercenary organization. But someone had to keep track of supplies and set policy for unexpected criminal charges.

"Anything special we need done on any of the Eurasian landmass?"

"Not much. But if you'll give me a minute..." Arnold turned in his chair, grabbed a large binder and thumbed through it carefully, pulling a couple of pages and then scribbling down the relevant portions on a piece of paper. "Two assassinations, one natural causes, and an art theft from a secure Goblin vault somewhere in Siberia. I've left off the one from a Ms. Zabini. Bye, Boss!"

Arnold went back to typing. The nice thing about memos was that it was more time he could spend not wondering about that new figurine Kedward had given him.

Two days later, Girl Tobi approached the Head Table at breakfast time and placed a collection of Polaroids in front of Igor Karkaroff. The man stared at them for some time and then rose and stormed from the room, turning ever darker shades of red. Dumbledore picked them up and thumbed through the collection. There was Girl Tobi, in front of each of the landmarks, frozen mid-wave, and standing behind someone who was clearly the subject of the picture. He calmly stacked the lot up, squared them off, and set them on fire. The last thing he needed around his office was more evidence that he might have a student even stranger than Professor Potter. They were going to award the girl her points and pretend this never happened.

A week after that, the Great Hall was turned into a conflagration. At one time, this would have been normal (when Gryff and Helga were having one of their multi-day rows about something); in more recent years, it had become uncommon to have truly widespread destruction outside the Potions classroom. Of course in the most recent years, while there hadn't been devastation, Professor Potter had encouraged the learning of fire-suppressing spells. The result was that the Rune Ward went up in front of the High Table while the various houses flipped their own tables over and used them as improvised barriers, tucking away younger students and putting up shields.

The reason for this was the French demihuman standing in the middle of the Hall. It had been several minutes since she had ceased her long tirade of French invectives and had moved on to primal screaming in the center of a whirling tower of fire that sucked the air from the castle into it. She didn't stop until the flames had snuffed the oxygen from around her long enough that she passed out around the same time that the fire ceased.

In turn, the reason for Fleur's literally incandescent fury was that she had been informed that despite breaking several records and nearly dying repeatedly to shave precious seconds off her time, she had

come in second by a week. The last straw had been when Percy had commented that in the background of more than one of her photos, Girl Tobi could be seen, jumping into another picture going on. Or, in one case, behind Fleur.

Given the circumstances, it was generally agreed that the response had been rather mild.

-OMAKE-

Jiraiya scowled up at the clouds. Sure, it was called "Rain", but that didn't have to be literal. It wasn't like Fire country was on fire. Or even all that hot. The ever-present rain had been unpleasant at first, but the steady, unwavering patter was working a sort of cruel torment on his nerves. It didn't feel right. He couldn't leave, though.

Somewhere in here was a threat to Leaf and his godson and those both had to be dealt with.

There was something wrong with this place. The people weren't hiding the way they would from a tyrant, but they had no real life to them, either. They plodded through the streets of their little towns, going about their business and trying to scrounge what food they could from the water-logged ground. No one had commented on his presence, or even paid him any mind.

Worse, though, were the houses of entertainment. Taverns and inns didn't have laughter and cheer filling them. There was just table after table of unsmiling patrons, all absorbed in quiet drinking. No one chatted or played cards or even called for another round. Maids went from table to table, refilling glasses and collecting the coins owed.

The brothels were an abomination. No one was happy there. Not even the whores. They didn't even *pretend* ! It was just rooms filled with blank-faced women mechanically going through the motions. The whole place was already dead.

"Hello, Jiraiya." He'd turned, not expecting to encounter someone who used his name as an insult. Behind him was a very lovely young woman. Despite the cloak, he could tell her body was nicely formed and the blue hair with the flow... er...

"Konan?" He'd blinked. It was one thing to hear the name and make the connection and another to be confronted with the evidence.

"We couldn't believe it's you. After all these years, you finally come back to Rain."

"We'?"

His question had been answered when Yahiko stepped out from behind a shack. The boy had taken up piercing. He also had gained a hard, angry expression. Then another orange-haired man had stepped up next to Yahiko. And another. And another. Five men had joined Yahiko.

The thing that had been bothering him finally triggered. "Yahiko, why do you have the Rinnegan?"

"Yahiko is dead." The answer had come from six mouths at once. All six were beneath pairs of Rinnegan eyes. "He died after you abandoned us. All that's left is Pein."

Long-trained senses had Jiraiya dodging as a blast of force blew the cobblestones apart, sending shrapnel into the buildings nearby. A leap backwards got him out of the immediate danger, but that was enough to put him into the sights of one of the men who had begun to launch actual missiles at him. One had rushed in towards him as the others moved. Three had stayed together, the squat one in front of the one with the broad nose and Yahiko. The one who looked feminine had conjured a freakish bird and launched into the air.

Jiraiya had been hard-pressed to fend off the one in melee and avoid the barrage of ranged attacks at the same time. Then he'd known to dodge in time again and the building he'd been fighting on exploded.

Something had hooked behind his navel and yanked him towards Yahiko. He'd tried to take advantage, summoning a rasengan and planning to smash it into one of the men. The squat one had gotten in the way and the whole sphere had vanished into his hand.

Still, it had been enough to let him disengage again. Yahiko had pursued, black rods extending from his hands to strike at him. A drop or two of blood had seen to summoning Ma and Pa. He hadn't needed to use Sage mode in a very long time. It clearly surprised the six men.

"They're sharing vision," Ma had observed as he used the melee fighter to block Yahiko's rods, watching in satisfaction as they pierced vital organs. Then he'd been backflipping away to escape another blast and forced to expend chakra to adjust trajectory midair so that he could avoid the barrage of missiles.

He'd nearly died when the melee fighter leapt into the fray a minute later, trying to grapple him and getting used as a shield against ranged attacks for its trouble. It was definitely dead. That hadn't stopped it from trying to pin him down again while he tried to close with the ranged fighter.

"It's the one at the back!" Ma had shouted.

Yahiko's calm anger had turned into shock when Jiraiya had put on a burst of speed and nearly reached the target Ma had pointed out. Only the diving intercept by the bird had saved the man, and the one on the bird's back had been turned into paste by the rasengan. Viscera had flown everywhere and for a moment, he'd felt more alive than he had in years. Ninja lived by the sword.

He'd gone on the offensive, dodging around the melee fighter- again -and putting a fist into Yahiko's face. It had hurt to do, but it needed doing. The bones had crunched under his hand as the surprised expression melted into a broken mass of injuries. The black rod from Yahiko's chest had been a shock that cost him the use of his left

arm. He should have retreated, but there was no way he could leave things like this.

It had been eerie, the fight was virtually without any speech. Normally ninja of a certain caliber would have at least a bit of conversation. Here, they had been focuses solely on killing. The rod in his shoulder had gone into the melee fighter's eye and out the back of his head before pasting it with a rasengan to the chest.

He'd been forced to dodge Yahiko's fist and the extending rod. It was hard not to be slightly annoyed that his student had apparently expected a trick to work a second time. The sudden tug dragging him onto the rod meant that it did.

A tear ran down Jiraiya's face. He'd never get to see Naruto rise to power or try to turn Minato's grandchildren into raging perverts. Or bed Tsunade. And the end had come at the hands of a boy he'd thought of as a son.

"Y-you," he coughed and blood spilled over his lips as he stared up at the rain. "T-trait-traitor." He forced himself to concentrate, it was so easy to drift into quiet. "You betrayed everything I taught you, boy! You murdered Nagato for his eyes and became a monster! You're no better than Hanz-"

"Konan!"

For Jiraiya, the world became a conflagration.

(A/N John)

So we finally found some time to write. I don't know if this will last, but I really want to finish this story. And several others I'm working on. Not the least of which being FMB and BIT.

(A/N 2 John)

What I'm saying is that I don't want to get your hopes up that we'll be publishing a lot. At best, it's going to be slow. We have less time than we used to for writing.

(A/N 3 John)

The good news is that we got a new laptop, so it doesn't run out of charge quite as fast. Barely.

(A/N 4 John)

As you can see, the Narutoverse is becoming a dangerous place.

Queen, circa 1980

Chapter 98: Queen, circa 1980

"You might be wondering why it is that you've been called here on a fine Easter Sunday."

"I'm guessing it has to do with a task," Krum said dryly. "I could be spending time with my girlfriend, you know."

"Yes." Percy kept his reply short. "Specifically, you are being tasked with the collection of a dangerous magical beast. Your score will be tallied based on rarity of the creature, the level of danger it poses in capture, and how many laws you violated bringing it into the country."

"And also adjusted by biased judging," Dumbledore put in. "I'm posing that instead of having Igor present, we just award ten points to Mister Krum."

"Bah!"

"Seconded," said Madame Maxime.

"All in favor?"

"Aye!"

"Aye!"

"Aye!"

"Nay, you bastard!"

"Motion carried; you're dismissed Igor."

"How long do we have?" Fleur asked.

"One month. As usual, you are excused from classes for the duration. Except for Professor Potter, who I expect will commute."

"Yep."

"Yahoo!" Girl-Tobi took off on foot across the lawn for the gates.

"I'm not sure I want to know what she's going to bring."

"Pairs again?" Millie asked as they landed. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Just surprised. You had me pack a bathing suit."

"We're only here for the night," Viktor replied as he helped her down from the broom and began to lead her towards the bistro they'd enjoyed on their last visit. "Then we head to Nice for a week. We're going to be spending most of the time on Sardinia."

"Oooh." Millie smiled at her boyfriend. "That sounds nice."

"On our way back to Hogwarts, we'll stop in and visit your parents... are you sure you really want me to hit your mother with a beater's bat?"

"Yes."

"Professor Dumbledore?" Percy edged into the Headmaster's office and stood, shifting from foot to foot. "You remember how we were worried about international incidents?"

Dumbledore's scowl could have scored stone. "Yes."

"Well... um..."

"Spit it out, boy."

"There has been a... a... an event in, well, I'm not exactly sure where it is, because the location is secret... but Charlie sent me a howler ahead of the official report..." Dumbledore closed his eyes.

"Apparently a very attractive woman flew into the preserve on a broom, blasted the largest female with fire until it rolled over and then put a giant collar on it and flew away with it in tow."

"I see."

"Um, sir?"

"What else?"

"We didn't exactly make preparations for *live* captures."

"Bugger."

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"What now?"

"You remember how there was the incident in the dragon preserve?"

"Yes." Dumbledore sounded decidedly testy. There was a small stack of paperwork on his desk bearing the seals of the ICW.

"Well... her... um... her mate apparently flew off a day later, in the same direction."

The inkwell on Dumbledore's desk shattered.

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"*What?*" The snapped demand came from behind a large pile of paperwork on the Headmaster's desk. Not only ICW paperwork, but also from Romania, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, Armenia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and several Ministry departments. The Headmaster had been decidedly unhappy since Hagrid had cheerfully cleared a portion of the Forbidden Forest for the Horntails

(who were expected any day now) and was now making giant basenets for the inevitable brood.

"I... there is a complaint from several African governments about the unexplained disappearance of a nundu..." Percy trailed off in the face of Dumbledore's glare.

The Horntails arrived with little fanfare. Considering that the students had seen one of the species recently, there wasn't much to be interested in. Professor Potter had been asked by several people including Fleur to please not use them for his classes, so the two had settled in and Hagrid had gleefully reported that there was probably going to be a clutch soon. Dumbledore had stormed from the Great Hall at that point.

"Profes-"

"WHAT?" The chairs in the room were now stacked with paperwork as well.

"Many things. I have reports of an exsanguinated re'em in America and a tailless manticore in Greece. That's the best of the lot."

"Explain." Some of the paperwork began to smolder.

"A giant at a reserve had its arms cut off. Someone went to the dragon preserve in eastern Europe, killed and skinned a Ukrainian Ironbelly and beheaded an adolescent Hungarian Horntail. The Nepalese report that a yeti had its legs removed. A dead nundu was found in the Sahara without its liver. Oh, and the head, legs, and tail of a chimera were left lying in a temple in Greece again."

"Get out!"

The floo flared to life. The person who looked through it found an office which was apparently made of paperwork. All furniture had vanished under the mounds.

"Professor Dumbledore," the voice was that of Ilvermorny Headmaster Fontaine. "I must lodge a complaint."

"Yes?" Despite his annoyance, there were a few people in the world that Dumbledore would usually make time for. Still, he was on his last nerve.

"One of your professors came to my school and murdered our mascots!"

"What?"

"My thunderbird had its wings cut off, the horned serpent's jewel was ripped from its forehead, and my wumpus had its eyes plucked out! And he just killed the pugwudgie to, and I quote here, 'complete the set'!"

"Why do you think it was one of my people, Fontaine?"

"I don't know, Dumbledore. It's just a suspicion I have. Also that he INTRODUCED HIMSELF AS ONE!"

"He could have faked-"

"With your signature! Just walked up to the groundskeeper, said 'I'm a visiting scholar from Hogwarts, can you please show me to your mascots?' If I ever see Professor Potter on my grounds again, I will kill him!" The floo snuffed out. Then the paperwork in the office burst into flames.

Girl-Tobi turned up two days before the end of the task to less fanfare and more terror as she led a live nundu onto the grounds.

Hagrid had wept with joy. Dumbledore just wept.

Ten minutes before the task was completed, Professor Potter strolled up from the dungeons leading a hulking brutish creature covered in gray hide and sporting broad, feathered wings. The dragon's head had slit-pupiled eyes and more than animal intelligence in them.

"Hi, Professor Dumbledore." The voice was deep and booming, coming from a chest the size of a small car. At the incredulous look, it went on. "DeMont, sir? I graduated last year."

Dumbledore's stony expression grew somehow darker as he registered the name and realized what was standing in front of him.

"I call it the improved chimer-"

"Krum wins." Dumbledore glared at the judges until they all nodded. "Good." Then he stormed back to his office.

There hadn't been trouble with the creation by Professor Potter. 'Trouble' was far too mild a term for the chaos that followed. Most of the world didn't notice and even most magicals were completely unaware of the whole thing. Those few who were engaged in actual legislative activity (as opposed to the majority of legislators, who tend to exhibit little in the way of independent thought. (As required in order to get anything done in a committee of more than about ten)), in certain specific kinds of regulation, and the members of the ICW, however, were going without sleep.

The Chamber of the ICW (located in an unused janitorial closet in the basement of the UN) was in an uproar as the debate raged. The subject was whether the new species was a violation of bans on breeding of magical creatures or not. A collection of delegates were arguing that despite the obviously troubling nature of the monster, that this was not actually *breeding* per se, and so necessitated the passing of new legislation (which would probably be negotiated over

wine at a nice local restaurant). Others were insisting that as the creature was allegedly fertile that this qualified as sufficiently breeding-like to warrant sanction.

Albus Dumbledore had kept quiet. As far as he was concerned, this would be best chalked up to it being Hari Potter violating not the law but just reality in general. Since the ICW was unlikely to tolerate such a concept and was made of career diplomats who never considered their day complete unless they had spent several hours in 'debate' (defined as shouting over everyone else so that the democratic process could be effected), he contented himself with putting in earplugs, conjuring a barrier against flying spittle, and had instead sat down with some of the more skilled barristers on staff to begin drafting new laws regarding the creation of new species without direct breeding. No doubt, what actually passed would not contain a word of this original, but when he presented it to them, they might at least argue over something productive. Not that he thought a detail like making it illegal would stop Hari Potter from doing whatever he pleased. There was a certain petty pleasure in knowing that these people were getting worked up over something akin to trying to legislate the path of a hurricane.

Dumbledore looked up with mild interest as the American delegation got some news which did not seem to make them happy. He edged over to them and removed his earplugs. Apparently, someone in the American Ministry had decided to try and sort out the underlying problem by putting down the monster. Considering that this was a creation made by Professor Potter and, from what Dumbledore had gathered, inhabited by an adult Wizard trained by Professor Potter, he was unsurprised to learn that the effort had resulted in a large number of dead Wizards. It was only a matter of time before the Americans tried to demand extradition so they could kill it or just made a spirited attempt to kidnap the damned thing. He walked away, mentally noting that the United States was likely to have a substantially lower number of hit wizards shortly.

"Boss." Arnold looked over the once-and-future employee of the Dawn. "When you said you needed to borrow him, I had expected to get him back."

"He is back. Say hello to Arnold."

"Hello."

Arnold sighed and sat down at his desk. He wasn't sure what to make of the monstrous figurine that had appeared on his desk a week ago.

"Really, Cornelius," the voice was saccharin. "It's clear that Dumbledore must be up to something. There have been so many incidents over the past few years. Now nearly all your trainee aurors are fanatically loyal to one of his people. He's plotting."

"I don't know." Fudge looked at his brandy glass. He'd spent the morning being harangued by the Yank representatives to the ICW for an incident in the Colonies. There had been the time that was normally reserved for pre-lunch-tea in meetings with the Magical Creatures department head about new domestic regulation, and lunch had been with Dumbledore and that twit Fobbins who was the UK representative to the ICW on international creature regulations. For some reason that no one had quite explained to him, there was a pressing need to regulate the combining of species without breeding them. He didn't understand how that worked, but he'd agreed to support their proposals because the meal had been disgusting and he wanted to get to his office and maybe at least have a cold breakfast and a nap. Instead, he'd been headed off by Lucius Malfoy who he'd been rather short with because it had been days since he got a full twelve hours of sleep and had a decent meal. Whatever Dumbledore was doing, it was surely causing him trouble. Now he was sitting in his office and trying to have a quiet meal and his Undersecretary had decided now was the perfect time to talk about Dumbledore and the auror problem. "Dumbledore has been really unhappy recently. I don't think he's much more thrilled about this

whole breeding mess than I am. Possibly more upset, because he seems to be mixed up in it, Dolores."

"He's clever is all. It's a ruse to hide his plans, Minister. But I'm sure you saw through it straight away."

"I did?" Fudge closed his eyes. He didn't want to look foolish. "I mean: of course I did. He's up to something. Fine. What am I supposed to do about Albus Dumbledore? He's popular."

"Well, we can see to that. There's been lots of trouble recently, after all. And it's all related to Hogwarts. It's his fault, you know. He's been trying to discredit you."

"I can't be having that!" Fudge knocked back his drink.

"I'm sure you have a plan," she prompted. "Like appointing someone to the Defense post, perhaps. Someone who will make sure they learn less fanatic violence and more loyalty and trust in the Ministry?"

"I know she'd be perfect," the speaker perked up. "But I can't spare Amelia Bones." She scowled. "She's one of the few veteran aurors who hasn't retired in the last two years."

"I meant that you were probably thinking of someone with more of an eye to more... traditional values? Who knows the importance of blood?"

"Of course! I can't believe I didn't think of it sooner. Do you think Lucius would mind the job?"

Umbridge closed her eyes and silently prayed to whoever would listen that her boss would stop missing the point. "Perhaps," she said through gritted teeth. "You might want to consider someone who would instill loyalty to you, Cornelius?" She hoped the man would get the bloody hint before she wrote it on a conjured brick and bashed his head in with it.

==OMakE==

Sasuke approached the designated spot with trepidation. He wasn't sure what to make of the letter:

Brother,

It has come time to fight and prove my strength.

Come to Clan Bunker 17.

Love,

Itachi

P.S. You've outgrown Sound. Resign.

Since the letter had managed to find him in a secret Sound bunker that was supposed to be, well, secret, he got the impression that if Itachi had wanted to kill him, that would have been the time. Still, he'd tendered his resignation from Sound in the Uchiha tradition-he wasn't generally a fan of his clan, but sometimes they had the right idea. Besides, Sasuke rather liked the Grass Cutter and was happy to have acquired it in the process.

He was on guard and his eyes were alight and ready to fight. Which was why he was surprised to find a small table, two chairs, two saucers, and a jug of sake. And his brother.

"Hello, little brother." Itachi poured each of them a saucer. He coughed and Sasuke saw the blood flecking at his lips. "Sit. Time is short and there are some important things to go over." He knocked back his sake and poured another.

Sasuke approached warily, sword drawn. "Um..."

"I'm not doing too well," Itachi showed his brother the blood that had speckled his hand. "I'm dying, Sasuke. I have been for a while. I

managed to make it this long on willpower and my son needing me. Now sit down." Sasuke sat. "The village ordered the massacre. The clan was-

"-rebelling. I know."

"Oh." Itachi looked somewhat wrongfooted. "This isn't how I was expecting this to go. Somehow I expected more anger."

"Our clan were a seriously poisonous bunch of monsters. The world's better off without them."

"Okay. That helps a bit." Itachi paused. "You need to join the Akatsuki."

"I *what?* "

"Otherwise we won't have a spy when I'm gone." Sasuke goggled at his brother. "Otherwise Lord Jiraiya won't have any information on what the Akatsuki are doing."

"Oh." Sasuke thought that about covered it.

"You need to know that the man in charge isn't the one who claims to be the leader. It's a man wearing an orange mask who calls himself Uchiha Madara. He's dangerous enough to be. Head to Rain and make yourself useful to him. Do whatever you have to in order to stay close." Itachi produced a scroll.

Sasuke opened it. Signed by the Third was a long-term assignment to the Akatsuki as an S-ranked mission and clearance to commit treason in service of his cover.

"Now, let's make sure you're ready for the Akatsuki, little brother." Sasuke leapt back as Itachi upended the table and the world began to burn.

Itachi's smile was bitter as Sasuke removed the sword from his chest. "I'm sorry, Sasuke. But you need these eyes in order to face him." He coughed. "I'm sorry I left you behind, but I didn't want to taint you with disloyalty. Promise you'll look after my son for me." His eyes slowly closed.

Sasuke took a deep breath as bloody tears ran down his face. "Goodbye, big brother." He exhaled white-hot flames over the body.

(A/N John)

So, I'm sure everyone is mad at us now. We had planned for Itachi to die for a while now. This wasn't spur-of-the-moment.

(A/N 2 John)

As a side note: look! We got a chapter out in less than a year!

(A/N 3 John)

Hari's Chimera

Base - Werewolf Akatsuki Employee

Wings - Thunderbird

Skin - Ukrainian Ironbelly

Head - Adolescent Hungarian Horntail

Head-Jewel - Horned Serpent (invisibility and flight)

Brain - Acromantula

Eyes - Wumpus Cat

Body - Chimera

Arms - Giant

Legs - Yeti

Blood - Re'em

Liver - Nundu

Tail - Manticore

(A/N 4 John)

After Remus Lupin, Dumbledore realized that dreamless sleep potion was a better solution than a shack. And that in a pinch, he had a whole dungeon to store werewolf-students in.

We're Not Dead

Chapter 99: We're Not Dead

Two champions sat in the small office. Fleur and Hari had not been amused to find that Girl-Tobi had decided to forego the briefing on Sasori's last mission. Krum had only just landed when the meeting was announced and had promptly turned around and flown off again with Millie clinging to him.

The briefing was, well, brief.

"You have been informed of the ultimate objective of the hunt. I have no clues for you this time. It will be up to you to figure it out on your own. Remember that this is not a mission to be handled with a hammer." Sasori was looking at Hari when he said the last bit. "I will drop off the missive with your second." He rose and left.

"It feels like this is stacked against me," Fleur said.

Arnold reviewed the short set of instructions. "That's all we have to go on, is it?" Sasori nodded. "Well, it will be good to get this dealt with." He picked up the phone and dialed. "Kirkbane.

Congratulations on another priority job. I'm sending you the particulars. Let me be clear on this: if you fuck up, *you* can tell the boss you failed."

From the earpiece, Sasori heard a superlatively attractive voice say: "Is that Arnold? Give me the ph-" then the clack of Arnold hastily putting the phone in its cradle.

"Do I want to know?"

"I don't want to know."

Hari watched with satisfaction as his students engaged in independent study. Those in Fifth Year and below had begun a live-fire skirmish on the lawn and were making a spirited effort to turn it into a series of earthworks and fortifications which constantly changed hands with the allegiances of the combatants.

His Sixth Years were engaged in advanced field practice of their medical techniques patching up the younger students and occasionally corralling a stray brat back onto the lawn. Those who were bucking for every bit of extra credit (which was a necessity to be accepted into the aurors these days) were wading into the fight to administer first aid to the wounded. So far, there had been no permanent injuries and Hari was conflicted as to whether this was a good thing.

The Seventh Years had deployed en masse to the Forbidden Forest to engage in an Acromantula hunt. At some point, he was going to have to step in and curtail these forays, lest the colony be too depleted to serve as training for future students.

"Yer a monster fer letting them hurt innocent creatures," declared the half-giant beside him.

"Evening, Hagrid. I wanted to talk to you about that, actually. Do you think you could erect some sort of fence around the colony?"

"I guess..."

"While you're here, I've been thinking... I understand you are responsible for the Skrewts?" Hari watched one of the creatures explode into the combat, blasting a fortification to pieces and sending students flying.

"Um..."

"I rather like them, though they are lacking in imagination. Do you think that if I procured some breeding pairs, you could make something more... inventive?"

"Um..."

"The armor, for example, is nice." Hari observed several piercing hexes gouge chunks out of the Skrewt without doing lasting harm. "Have a list ready for me by dinner. That will be all, Hagrid."

The man trotted away, unsure of how to feel about the prospect of breeding more victims for Professor Potter. And how much he was even more terrified of telling the young Professor 'no.'

Hari settled himself on the ground and focused. There was one spell that was nearly required for auror trainees as of last year. He had not worked out how to cast the patronus. His preference for using unmitigated violence was unfortunately not an acceptable replacement. The theory was simple enough, but he wondered if there was some experiential component that was missing. He hated not being able to teach that, but so far he'd left it to Moody to handle that class.

Protective thoughts, protective thoughts, protective...

Everyone stopped to stare at the twenty-foot tall figure made of green fire that was suddenly standing in the middle of the lawn. It carried a long, nearly straight blade in one giant hand, the other was empty, but had claws. The single eye in its head was a glowing crimson flame. Red wings sprouted from its back, speckled with black, white, and green. A long, yellow mustache drooped from under its mask. Strangely, its armor was a mottled, tortoiseshell pattern.

"Hey, Uncle Sasori! Look what I can do!"

Hari turned his head, the giant's turning with it. "Do you mind?" The spellfire died away.

"Sorry, Professor!"

The month that followed was one of great, if sometimes hidden, excitement throughout the world. Secure facilities were breached in record numbers, many of them without notice for a week or more, and confidential information was recovered and used to identify further targets with impressive ruthlessness.

There was an uptick in the number of people working at totally-not-secure-government-facilities-honest being checked into institutions for the insane, most of them gibbering messes. Tentacles were mentioned with frequency unusual in such cases. At the same time, a few people received gifts in the mail which turned out to be far less helpful than a mere monkey's paw (and one man received a literal monkey's paw. It did not end well).

With the exception of an incident near the Arc de Triomphe involving an omnibus full of school children, another incident in Sydney which drew the attention of the constabulary to an operation engaged in koala smuggling, and a final one in the London Opera which quite ruined the final aria, the more active surprise was confined primarily to that class of persons who are definitely not working for shadowy government agencies. Among such persons, though, it generally accepted that something was going on, though what exactly it was did not make itself known for quite some time.

Hari presented Sasori with a small figurine.

"Well, you managed to complete an assignment." Sasori nodded.

Dumbledore stood at the Head Table. "We have somehow managed to go all the way to June without losing anyone important." The two Headmasters beside him began to protest. "ANYONE IMPORTANT!" he shouted, to be heard over them. "So it is with great surprise that I find myself announcing that all competitors are going to be entering into the final task tomorrow evening. In order to ensure that this will be as entertaining as possible, the event is to take place in a hedge-maze, which has been rendered magically opaque at the request of

the Ministry's Department of Fun Police. Some of you know it as "Magical Games and Sports." At that point, Dumbledore had to stop speaking because he couldn't be heard over the twins' gales of laughter (produced by an experimental device that blew winds of canned laughter through an area).

"As the scores stand, Girl-Tobi is in first place, followed by Viktor Krum. Mademoiselle Delacour is in third, and in a distant fourth is Professor Potter. As such, Ms. Girl-Tobi will be entering the maze first. It will be the objective of the champions to reach the center and return with the Triwizard Cup. Though since there are four wizards, it seems odd that we have continued to refer to this as Triwizard. Especially as there are two witches."

He sat down and was about to pick up a fork when it apparently occurred to him that he had not actually made the announcement he'd intended. Dumbledore sprang back to his feet. "As such, the... ahem... 'third' task is taking place in a week's time. Attendance is mandatory. I think that covers it. Oh yes: Quidditch finals will be delayed this year as their normal date happens to be in the middle of event-preparations. I trust this will not be too much of an issue." He sat down once more and began to serve himself food from the platters nearest to him.

Students filed out to the Quidditch pitch for the final task. Several (Ronald Weasley chief among them) were vocally horrified at the "desecration" of the sacred pitch. Most students let it go and made for seats out of the wind. The general consensus was that at least Professor Dumbledore had alerted them ahead of time that there would be nothing to see. The upper years (among whom thinking ahead was not merely encouraged, but absolutely required if one wished to see graduation) brought homework with them. Hermione brought several books that she swore she hadn't memorized despite having an eidetic memory.

Of those not paying attention, the Slytherins in proximity to Tam were warily observing her fiddling with a wooden cube. No one had any

reason to expect something horrible to happen as a result-unlike Professor Potter, Tam usually didn't say things like 'good thing I didn't blow up the room again.' On the other hand, it was Runes work assigned by Professor Potter. Even if it worked *right*, there was no reason to think that meant it worked *safe*.

Girl-Tobi blinked when the bell chimed and had to be prompted several times to enter the maze. She insisted that it was dark and spooky in there. No one believed her, of course. But she had to be firmly informed that participation was not an optional activity. She proceeded to skip into the darkness, chirping happily in a vaguely annoying tune that Professor Dumbledore was certain would either ward off monsters by sheer aggravation or drive them to attempt to murder the girl to make her shut up.

Victor Krum promptly made the Fun Police liars by ignoring the chime and grabbing Millie before hopping on a broom and flying on a straight line towards Milan. He yelled out that he was going to see if the Italians had stolen the cup and put it in a tourist attraction or nice hotel.

When Fleur entered the maze, it was to no fanfare but the sound of hedges catching alight. Her progress (or lack thereof) was marked by the charred, smoking plant matter which failed to stay burned long enough for her to force her way through. Apparently, when no one was looking, Professor Potter had taken it upon himself to make sure that the maze was up to snuff.

Thus it was that almost a full hour after Fleur entered the maze, Hari strolled in, looking mildly interested for the short time it took for him to decide that unlike Fleur, the maze was going to do as he wished. The gouts of purple flame were only mildly alarming to most of the assemblage, which had grown used to the wielding of hellish fires as a standard tool over the last several years.

It turned out that even enhanced by Professor Potter, Fleur was unable to make it to the center of the maze. Dumbledore had taken

some time the night before to enchant and re-enchant the entire thing until it was more akin to a part of Hogwarts than greenery. That was why he was unsurprised to find Professor Potter absently burning his way right through: the castle knew better than to get in his way (Dumbledore was beginning to develop a theory that there were no secret passages where Professor Potter found them, but the castle merely adapted to avoid annoying him).

Hari watched the Acromantula scuttle away from him in terror as he approached the Cup. It was covered in a strange set of magical enchantments that he was pretty sure he'd seen before. When he reached out, he got to enjoy being dragged by his navel into an instant of flashing light. He came out of it dodging the red beam of light that flew at him. There was a popping sound and all that was left in the graveyard with him was an ugly infant which began to rant maniacally.

Hari shrugged and snapped its neck before beginning the trek back to the school. He figured it would take him a few hours.

Albus Dumbledore wasn't sure why he was surprised, he really wasn't. A moment or two after the maze informed him that Professor Potter had been whisked away from the grounds (which was part of the plan, though he made sure to act surprised), a small hand had tugged on his robe and a masked girl had held out a Triwizard Cup and asked if they were looking for it.

==OMaKE==

Pein had finally had enough of Itachi's failure to bring the Nine-Tails into the Akatsuki's grasp. He had already begun mobilizing when the news came in that Itachi had been killed by his younger brother. That was a bit odd, really. Unless Itachi had been slipping, there shouldn't have been any chance. Unless Sasori's reports were inaccurate. Or late. Again. That was a distinct possibility.

The ultimatum he gave to Leaf was simple: they had an hour to turn over what he wanted or he would begin to systematically destroy the village. He thought it was a reasonable offer.

Two hours later, he found that he was taking a very different deal. He smiled a little at the blond boy who stood in front of him. He'd been passionate in a way that Nagato hadn't managed in years. It was a relief, in a way. Still... as he gathered his power into his eyes and tried to avoid looking at the tears running down Konan's cheeks, he just had to say it. "I blame my nephew for this."

(A/N 1 John)

So, yeah. I've managed to get a chapter out. We're only most of the way through a year again. We've had this stuff planned out and I just need to write it. But I've been busy and Spoon's been down and between the two, we've just not gotten much done. If it helps any, we have a few one(ish) shots on our minds and I do want to do more with *For My Brother* and *Blood is Thicker*. And for every fic I have waiting for my attention, Spoon must have a dozen or more.

(A/N 2 John)

I can't say I have any idea when we'll manage to get another chapter out. Hopefully soon. I know how this goes, so there's that. But we need to actually do it. I've barely read any fanfic in months. Or read much of anything. I've been busy. But I'd like to manage another before the end of the year. I hope?

Home is Never the Same

Chapter 100: Home is Never the Same

When Hari turned up with the Cup, it made for a certain amount of paperwork. Dumbledore couldn't say he was entirely surprised by the duplication, though. The Ministry had to take a fair bit of convincing that they really couldn't tell the difference between the two cups and therefore were technically faced with two winners. Thankfully Mr. Greengrass had taken possession of his daughter's winnings once the Ministry had been persuaded to pay out double prizes. Professor Potter had been rather stoic about it and mostly complained about the final task being too easy. In fairness, there had been no serious injuries, let alone any deaths, during this Tournament and that was well behind the curve.

Hari closed out the year teaching classes to his attentive and slightly terrified students with a sense of satisfaction. It was a lot more fun than he'd ever really expected it to be. Instead of being frustrated with the utter incompetence that he had to start with, he just enjoyed seeing them grow and learn how to properly slaughter a fellow human in a heartbeat. Professor Dumbledore had impressed upon him a lesson similar to that of several of his uncles: to avoid civilian casualties. Professor Dumbledore hadn't phrased it the same way: instead of reminding him he wasn't paid for collateral deaths, he had focused on the idea of actually *protecting* civilians. Hari didn't mind that, in the end. Technically, a large number of missions were protection, it was just that he'd never really been along on them. Or had them assigned to him. So he'd actually had to do a bit of learning himself as he prepared the lesson plans for the upper years.

Hogwarts saw what was no longer a record number of O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s as students made sure not to disappoint Professor Potter and the Aurors had what was becoming the usual end-of-year flood of job applications from graduates, some of them with rather

disturbing letters of recommendation from Professor Potter or slightly less worrying (only a little) letters from Auror (ret.) Moody.

At breakfast before the students left, Dumbledore rose and cleared his throat, then exploded a conjured buffalo to get attention. "Thank you for attending the last meal of the school year. I'm glad to see that all of you are leaving. Despite my expectations, we have not faced some students repeating a year, so I offer a word of thanks to you for not extending the length of time I'll have to deal with you snot-nosed brats. I feel it only fair to inform all of you that the Hogwarts Express has just departed the station for King's Cross. You will all need to both arrange alternate methods of returning to your hovels and to raise the funds to pay for trespassing on my grounds." He sat down and went back to his toast.

Half the students fled the Hall, while the other half apparently decided that if they'd already missed the Express, there was no point in missing the rest of their breakfast and returned to their meals and conversations.

Konan was unsure of what to expect, but she'd been rehearsing the whole story in her head for days. Madara was out doing things and she was waiting for her nephew to return to the Tower so she could explain what had happened in the last ten months. Every time she glanced at Nagato's body, laying out on the meeting table, the tears started again.

She understood why he did it, she really did. The blond Uchiha was exactly who Nagato had wanted to be when Yahiko died. He'd never had the knack for being kind and believing that the world could be good. One talk with Uchiha Naruto had proved that there was someone like Yahiko left in the world, one who didn't just want a better world, but believed it could be achieved with every fibre of his being. It was a faith that could move mountains. It had moved Nagato's heart, at least.

She didn't blame him. Not for the deaths. Not for giving himself to undo what he'd done. Konan smiled through the tears; he had died as he hadn't lived: happy and believing in a future. She couldn't ask for more for her best friend. He'd been at peace and even now, his face had none of the hard lines and darkness that had been fixed there in life.

"Hey Aunt Kona—" the voice trailed off as Hari finished appearing in the Tower and saw what lay on the table. The pile of gifts fell to the ground in a jumble as he approached. "What happened?"

"I..." the prepared speech just failed her as she looked at him. There was a new expression on her nephew's face: something mixing confusion, disbelief, and pain. It occurred to her that he'd never had someone important die before. To her, it had become a fact of life that caring about people left her vulnerable. Hari... her nephew had never needed to worry about that with his family. Who could hurt the Akatsuki?

"Who do I kill?" the words were snarled out and the air started to grow heavy with power as the pain was shuffled off to make room for the easier, safer emotion of anger.

"No one," Konan said quietly. "He died resurrecting people he decided he shouldn't have killed." She felt the tears running again at the confusion that had returned to Hari's face. "He made a mistake and spent his life to undo it."

He shook his head. "But... dead?" he wasn't staring at his Uncle's body, but he didn't need to.

"That was the price," Konan mumbled. "He didn't mind paying it, Hari."

"Oh." It was clear Hari didn't really understand.

"He's not the only one, Hari."

"Not the only one what?"

"Dead, Hari. Kakuzu and Hidan were killed a month or so ago. Deidara is missing. Sasori—"

"Uncle Sasori is in the other world now. He helps run the branch organization."

"Oh." It was Konan's turn to be confused. "The rest aren't, though, Hari. I'm sure that Kakuzu and Hidan were killed and I haven't heard from Deidara in months." He looked stunned again, but she mustered courage to finish the list. "And your father..." it was going to kill him. "Itachi died two weeks ago."

To her surprise, Hari shook his head. "Dad's not dead."

"Hari..."

"He can't die. Nothing can kill Dad."

Konan shook her head and reached out to hug her nephew. Everything had gone to pieces around her. The Akatsuki was disintegrating. Madara had apparently begun recruiting Uchiha Sasuke the moment that Itachi had died. Her best friend was dead. Hari, though... she took comfort in knowing that Hari wasn't going to join the list any time soon. Not if she could help it.

"You can't stay." She said it quietly.

"Of course I can."

"No. Hari. You can't stay. You have to go back to the other world." She hoped he didn't ask why. She couldn't tell him that his favorite Uncle was possibly the most evil man in the world and was planning to do things she was now sure were absolutely wrong.

Hari nodded, not really sure what was going on. Aunt Konan seemed to have an idea of what to do and he was a bit too lost right now to

argue much. He gently detached himself from her and walked over to his Uncle's body.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he told the corpse. "I was supposed to train and train until I was ready and earn it. This feels like cheating. I know Uncle Sasori says I can't really cheat, but it still feels like I'm just being handed this. We were supposed to destroy Rain with our fight, Uncle Pein. It was supposed to be an epic battle." The Sharingan spun wildly and something hot and sticky trailed down one side of his face.

"Go on, Hari," Konan murmured. She watched with a carefully controlled expression as her nephew reached down and extracted Nagato's left eye. It was done with a great deal of skill and precision. Her nephew had grown, it seemed. She was less prepared to watch him casually pluck out his own Byakugan eye and begin the process of attaching the new eye in its place.

It was surreal, really, to watch. One eye was leaking blood that he didn't seem to notice, but he had absently sealed the spare eye into his wrist and then begun the surgical procedure right there. It barely took five minutes for him to have a complex, borderline legendary eye implanted into his skull.

The mismatched gaze was somehow older. It was painful to see it on Hari's face. "I'm sorry." Konan closed her eyes and was surprised to find herself wrapped in a hug initiated by her nephew. He'd never been one for gestures like that before. "Promise me you won't die, Hari. Everyone seems to die around me. I need you to promise you won't be one of them."

"I'm not going to die, Aunt Konan. I promise." The voice was soothing. Something relaxed in her chest. She knew he was strong, but right now, she could believe that Hari would do just what he said. He always did. If he promised not to die, then she could be sure he wasn't going anywhere. No one could warp reality like him.

Konan pushed him away. "Now get going." She wanted him gone before Madara got back. Just because she believed him didn't mean she wanted to test it. "Goodbye, Hari."

"I'll see you next summer, Aunt Konan."

Just as the fire surrounded him, he heard Konan speak again. "Goodbye, Hari."

Arnold looked up to see what turned out to be the most terrifying thing to date. His boss was glaring at him. He had a new eye, too, but it was the glare. There was more emotion in that look than he'd seen from Professor Potter in several years of knowing him.

"Give me a job."

"Right away."

"Something really violent. I'm going to kill someone, so I should get paid for it."

Arnold held out a folder and watched his boss vanish in a cloud of fire. He'd decided not to comment on the trail of blood from his old eye, nor the blood smeared around the new one. This was not a time to ask his boss *anything*.

"Mr. Sasori?"

"Yes?" Sasori hadn't bothered to poke his head out when Hari had arrived, but was mildly surprised that he hadn't visited him.

"I... I don't know what just happened."

It was cathartic. It really was. Hari stood in the ruins of a warlord's encampment, not even breathing hard. There was nothing around him for almost a mile. Nothing but scorched earth and a fine, white

ash. He'd burned the place, over and over. All he could see was his Uncle Pein lying there, dead. He'd looked at peace, too. But he was just as dead as if he'd been angry or sad or scared. Dead was dead. So he'd burned the entire area to the ground and set fire to the ashes and then scoured the ash with more fire until the whole area was devoid of anything but him.

On second thought, it didn't help. He was still just as angry and confused. Why hadn't Aunt Konan wanted him to stay? He should have stayed. Something was wrong. And the damned bird refused to bring him back. It hadn't even responded to him for days. Not since it had dropped him off here. And so he burned the place some more. It didn't tax his reserves, not even a little. He just kept letting out flames.

He hadn't wanted to go back to the office to get another job. He didn't really want to go destroy a city. Actually, he did. What he wanted to do right now was destroy everything in the world. But that would include destroying the Dawn and Daphne and Hermione and Blaise and Tracy and Millie and Pansy... and it would destroy their families and they'd be unhappy, too. He couldn't set fire to the world. Even if he didn't set fire to England and Scotland, if he burned the rest of it, he'd have no more jobs for the Dawn. He turned the massive clearing into a conflagration again, this time blasting the land clean with Fiendfyre.

There was a spell that fit his mood. Right now, when he cast that spell, he could feel the black tide of anger and pain rise up in him, but then it would spill out into a roiling mass of monstrous creatures that rent the land with claws and fangs. While they rampaged, the emotions in him were gone, lashing out at the world instead of him.

He thrust out a hand and the clearing turned into a crater as an invisible fist of the gods slammed into the earth. Ash flew into the wind as he repeated the strike over and over, blasting the crater with force. He didn't speak while he did. He just let out a long, incoherent scream that went beyond rage and sadness and left him limned with Fiendfyre while he blasted away.

He didn't cry, not really. He'd seen crying and it wasn't what he was doing. But he felt the sticky heat running down his face as he ran out of air and sat down, staring at the ruins.

Konan smiled weakly until Hari was gone. It was good to know he was gone from here. He'd have been devastated by Madara. Instead, she sat calmly and waited. She didn't have any friends left. The remaining members of the Akatsuki were Hoshigake, who was an ally of convenience at best, and Madara. She hadn't been friends with most of them anyway. She'd barely had any friends at all. The only one left was Hari and she'd made sure he was safe from this.

It was a surprise to find that she had run out of tears when he left. She didn't need to cry anymore. Everything was going just as it had always been destined to go. She and Nagato hadn't changed their fates, they hadn't even stalled them. This was how things were always supposed to end.

"Hello, Madara." She kept her face blank as he faded into reality.

He stared at the corpse for a long minute. "Where is the other eye?" He wasn't pretending to be Tobi anymore. This was the cold, malicious voice of Uchiha Madara.

Konan was surprised to find that she could smile. "Guess."

The one visible eye blinked.

"HAAAAAAAAAAAAAARR-
" and she triggered the explosive tags, consuming her world in flames.

==OMAKe==

Albus Dumbledore had a horrible feeling in his hip. It always felt like that when something really bad was going to happen. He didn't know what it was, but it wasn't a good feeling. In addition to his discomfort,

he was also experiencing the unusual sensation of being completely and totally confused. He knew what Hari had reported and had headed out here just as soon as he could. It had been a day at best, no one should have been coming to this nowhere cemetery in the back end of just as much nowhere. It hadn't been hard to guess which cemetery it was, either.

What confused him was the total lack of a corpse.

(A/N 1 John)

This was a remarkable chapter for me. It just came out in a couple of hours. I wrote this the day after we published Chapter 99. I don't know when Spoon is posting this, so that might be months ago by the time you read this.

(A/N 2 John)

The whole scene with Konan and Hari was almost painful for me to write. I kept tearing up while I wrote it. I hope it did the same to you and it wasn't all in my head.

(A/N 1 Spoon)

I cried too.

(A/N 3 John)

I can honestly say I don't know how all this will affect Hari in the long run. In many ways, he's resilient and will shrug off a lot of it. But I expect it will be there in the background. It's not as though he's suddenly having second thoughts about killing people for a living. Who knows. Maybe he'll start really thinking about his students as something more than an interesting project. Then again, maybe not.

Holiday Gift to Our Readers

Chapter 101: Holiday Gift to Our Patient, Lovely Readers

The damned bird still wasn't responding to him. Hari glowered murderously at airport security until they decided they had better things to do than search the fifteen-year-old traveling on his own. It was keeping him from going home to check on Aunt Konan. When he'd had a chance to think about it, she'd seemed too... off. He didn't know what was wrong with her, but it made something itch in his chest and he wanted to make sure she was okay. Instead, he was forced to rely on his people just to find out where his friends were so he could visit them.

Hermione was just about done with this. She'd put up with her family being followed for a week already, but it was getting on her nerves. The two men clearly thought they were doing a good job of blending into their surroundings. She'd give them that at least they weren't wearing Federal-Agent suits or brightly colored robes, but anyone trained by Hari would notice. At least if they could use magic to keep up a steady stream of detection charms and she was in the habit of using one that allowed her to track everyone within a fairly wide radius. Most people couldn't use it the way she did, but an eidetic memory meant that she remembered every return she'd had. The two had been following them since they'd gotten to the airport in London.

"I'll be back, mum." She pulled on a bathrobe and stepped away from the pool. Disillusionment was easy enough for her and she tiptoed back into the hotel and up to the third floor. It wasn't even a moment's work to work out which room they were in. The door was warded to hell and back, so she broke into the room next to it and transfigured a hole in the wall.

She didn't say anything to them until she'd stunned the both of them. It was more difficult than she'd been expecting and if she'd had a wand, there would have been a tremendous problem. As it was, whatever wards they'd thrown up had been enough to keep the staff from noticing a pitched battle in the room.

Once the two were disarmed, bound, and thoroughly disabled, she walked into their line of sight. "Can I help you two gentlemen?" She sat down on their bed and crossed her arms. "I don't appreciate being followed by whatever organization sent you. You're too muggle for it to be Death Eaters and I don't know who else would bother."

"Miss Granger," said one with sandy hair. "I... the boss is going to kill us."

"Assuming he gets the chance," Hermione pointed out mildly.

"Well, when he finds out the principal caught us, he's going to be upset."

"Princi... are you telling me you two are bodyguards?"

The one with darker hair nodded. "We work for the Dawn. Our boss assigned us to keep an eye on you. I don't know why, you seem perfectly able to take care of yourself."

"The... Dawn?"

"Yeah. You're a nice girl, Miss, so you probably wouldn't have heard of us. But we work for Professor Potter."

"He sent guards?"

"No, Miss. That was our boss, Miss."

"I see. And do you have a way to prove this?"

"Technically? No. I mean, I have the business card in my pocket and you could call the main office... well, Mister Sasori might be in."

"Would that help?"

"Indeed." Hermione walked to the phone. "That number, please?"

Hari didn't question why Arnold had exact locations for all his friends. Instead, he merely broke into one of the more warded magical prisons on the Continent to visit Millie. He observed as she waded into a riot that was bubbling nicely and proceeded to batter men into states of shock that replicated unconsciousness.

"Hey, Hari!"

"Things going well?"

"Yep!" Mille bashed a man a little too hard and scowled as his skull partially caved in. "Damn. That's going to come out of my pay."

Hari was glad to know that at least Daphne and Astoria were reliably at home. Apparently, no one had bothered to add him to the wards, so he broke in there, too. He found the two of them eating breakfast. Well, Daphne was eating breakfast. Astoria had presumably finished her breakfast and was gleefully chasing the nundu cub, who was in turn chasing a garden gnome that it was apparently allowing to live solely to torment.

"Hello, Daphne."

"Hari." Her tone was unwelcoming at best. "It seems that she knew you were coming. I have no other explanation for why she managed to guzzle syrup straight from the pitcher this morning. As such, I blame you for the headache already beginning."

"HARI!" Girl-Tobi came racing up to him to bounce in place.
"Anything interesting happen?"

"Apparently Hermione was being tailed by a couple of mercenary wizards. She caught them." Hari had been torn when he got that report. There had been no good answer to who he would want to win-either way, someone he wanted to win had to lose.

"Should I be worried about that?"

"I doubt it."

Blaise didn't even look up. "Mother is out on a date," he said. He'd heard the sound of the window opening and when nothing had died from the entrail-expeller he'd tossed in its direction, he decided that it was Hari. "Is there anything else you want?" he was reading a book and apparently quite invested in it.

"Just checking in."

"Well, I'm not sure. She's still pulling for us to date, though. I've tried to convince her that she will probably have grandchildren, but I can't say that's gotten through to her."

"You're not my type, Blaise."

"Somehow, that is at the bottom of my list of reasons, Hari."

Tracy was blissfully enjoying sleep when she felt someone enter her room and instinctively threw a piercing hex at it.

"Good, you didn't use your wand."

Tracy yelped. "Damn it, Hari. I've been enjoying getting to sleep in."

"That's a terrible habit to be in."

Pansy had been having a terrible summer. Her parents had been especially aggressive in trying to reeducate her on the proper

behavior for a good pureblood girl. There was only so much of it she could take. She wished she knew why they were suddenly pushing it so hard, though. Nothing had changed that she knew of aside from getting older. Technically, they might be worried that she was coming up to an age where they could marry her off, but she couldn't imagine that any pureblood family would want her.

To get away from the orders and disapproving stares, she'd taken to riding her bike all the way to London and roaring around ignoring the attempts to pull her over. That was how she ended up in this alleyway which she discovered was a dead end with a bunch of bikers gathered around the entrance, all looking rather mean.

"Lookit what we've got here," one of them called. Pansy scowled; he sounded drunk. "Bitch on a bike like she's got a right t'be there."

Pansy didn't wait for the rest of the drunken group to start talking. She'd already identified the leader. Her gun came up and drilled two large rounds into the man's chest and put a third into the middle of his forehead as he pitched backwards, showering several men behind him in brains.

"Before any of you get the bright idea to rush me; just consider that I was really over-ambitious with the three shots to him. I have plenty of rounds left in the mag and several more at my hip. If you rush me, I can probably put most of you down before you're even off your bikes.

"Now, you can either make me waste ammo and litter this entire place with corpses, or you can go the fuck on your way and leave me alone." There was some quiet conferring. "Look, if you don't pick in another ten seconds, I'll start shooting people until you make up your minds."

After a few more seconds of hurried discussion, one of the large, rather hairy men raised a hand. "Can we pick option three?"

"The fuck is option three?" Pansy ejected the magazine from her gun, a fresh one sliding into place in a blink.

"You run the gang?"

"The fuck?"

Hari had been planning to stop in and see Pansy, but he got a call from Arnold about an urgent job in London. Technically, it could be farmed out to someone else, but Arnold had been adamant that Hari take it himself.

He kicked in the door to the bar. "Hello jackasses. I'm looking for the 'Bloody Rose', if you'll kindly point them out to me, I'll leave with a minimum of killing the rest of you."

"Hi, Hari."

"Pansy?"

Hari sat down at a rather beaten table at the back of a bar that smelled of unwashed humans, alcohol, and tobacco smoke, watching as Pansy lit up a cigarette and took a pull from a bottle of whiskey. "You've been busy."

"It's something to pass the time. And it keeps me out of the house."

"So... I have a contract to kill you."

"And I'm not dead."

"Yes. Well. One time offer: if you'll pick up some of the fee, I'll go deliver a rejection in clear terms."

"Is it by any chance one of the other gangs?"

"Probably."

"Done."

Pansy smiled to herself and lit a cigarette, taking a drag as she reread the headlines in the paper. *Bloody Rose Breaks Bonez*. The warehouse that had been a haven for the enemy club had been burned to the ground with all hands, save one who'd been nailed to a wall with a rose carved into his back. Her parents would have been appalled at her satisfaction-not the violence, especially not to Muggles, but the fact that it had been done by hand. That was barbarism in their eyes. She wished she'd been the one to do the carving, but she didn't have Hari's talent for art.

Her glance flicked up at the boy in question. He was... brooding. She'd never seen that before. He'd plotted, planned, precipitated chaos, and generally been up to something most of the time she'd known him, but she'd never seen him brood. For that matter, she'd never seen him just hang around somewhere, either. He wasn't drinking or smoking with her crew, just sitting at the table with her. Brooding.

She really wished he'd do it somewhere else. She wasn't exactly a people-person and had no idea how to deal with someone like this. At least without firearms. There were questions she wanted to ask, though, but... to hell with it. "You seem to have two eyes now."

"Twelve," he said absently. It was as though he'd answered on automatic. She blinked. Whatever answer she had expected, that hadn't been it. "Mind if I use your back room for a day or two?"

The question was a bit random, but at least *that* was normal for Hari. "Sure. Why?"

"Need to do a ritual."

"Oh." Yeah, that was definitely a Hari answer. "Alright." She turned her head to face the bar. "Everyone stay the fuck out of the basement until he says otherwise." She jabbed a thumb at Hari.

"Yes, Boss!"

"I don't think I'm ever going to get tired of hearing that."

Hari didn't quite smile, but he nodded. "It's nice, isn't it?" He lapsed back into silence and stared off into space.

She wanted to ask the biggest question on her mind-well, aside from what had happened to his eye-but she just knew that wasn't going to be a good question to ask. She didn't know why, but he was back far too early and didn't have any stories about his family's exploits, either.

Pansy stubbed out the remainder of her cigarette and motioned for someone to bring her a drink. It had taken all of a few minutes for her guys to learn not to argue with her when she wanted alcohol. She knocked back the tumbler of whiskey and sighed as the heat crawled down her throat. It gave her a nice, comforting warmth and right now, she was starting to feel a little cold.

==Omake==

Sasuke just barely kept his blade from slicing into the man when he materialized beside him. His arm certainly twitched enough for any veteran ninja to know what had almost happened. "Can I help you?" His eyes were still covered by bandages from his own impromptu surgery. It had been agonizing, but he wasn't exactly going to go back to Leaf with his brother's will so recently transferred and Kabuto probably wouldn't be accepting his application for return to Sound either. Probably for the best that Kabuto had taught him medical techniques, then.

He didn't ask who the man was. The fact that he'd appeared from nowhere went a long way to telling him. He was fairly certain the man wasn't the Fourth returned from the dead, which left only one person.

"I'm here to offer you revenge."

Right Sasuke thought. Pretend you don't know. Pretend you don't know. Pretend you don't know...

(A/N John)

Well, I've got another chapter done. So that's something. This has been sitting on my drive, three-quarters done for months and I finally decided I was going to finish it and get it out to you guys. I don't know that I'd call it my best work, but it's not the worst thing I've done for this fic. At least I don't think so. It's not as funny as I might want, but there are things going on at the moment in the story that don't lend themselves to humor. I expect that to change at least a little in the next chapter. If only because the focus will (temporarily) shift away from Hari.

(A/N 2 John)

Like I said, though: Hari's resilient and he'll recover sooner than later. But there's probably always going to be a little part of him that feels the loss of Nagato. He really had planned to fight for the eye and then they'd celebrate his victory afterwards. He was cheated out of that—both the victory and the shared experience with a favored uncle.

There's also the fact that his family seems to have been falling apart. Half of his uncles were dead when he got home. Kisame was absent. He didn't even get to see Tobi.

(A/N 3 John)

The previous chapter still makes me a little sad to think about. Poor Konan.

(A/N 4 John)

Well, I think that's all for me. No idea if Spoon will add anything. No doubt she will. Heavens alone knows what, though.

We're most of the way there, people. Thank you all for bearing with us so far. The story from here on out is pretty well settled... which of course means that something I do will send everything we've planned spiraling out of control. But still, we're on track and I just need to do the actual writing.

Have a happy New Year everyone.

(A/N Spoon)

Just to spite John's expectations, I shan't be adding anything

Incom-never mind

Chapter 102: Incom-never mind

Cornelius Fudge had been getting increasingly worried for several years now. If asked in anything resembling an official capacity, he would have explained that his concern was because the aurors-nominally a peacekeeping body-were becoming more and more militarized. And violent. Mustn't forget that. Had anyone asked in a more private manner, it would have been because there had been a drop in his bribe money; while families still paid handsomely for certain privileges, there were fewer opportunities for it. Everyone was keeping to strictly-legal loopholes and that meant that it was more a matter of expedition fees than looking-the-other-way fees, which were usually much larger. Amelia Bones had gotten out of control with investigations and the aurors were no longer accepting 'a consideration' to leave things be.

Actually, come to think of it, he was a bit worried about the aurors after all. They were a body of increasingly-well-trained personnel with a decidedly violent streak and were apparently fanatic in their loyalty to their Hogwarts professor. That wasn't good. Not at all.

And if he hadn't been worried about it beforehand, he certainly was by the time the syrup had finished dripping into his ear.

The flames in Dumbledore's fireplace blazed green. That wasn't too odd, he had visitors and desperate pleas for help all the time. What was odd was that it was Lucius Malfoy.

"Dumbledore!" the man seemed desperately grateful that he'd found the aged wizard. "You've got to help me!"

Putting on his most genial expression of elderly imbecility, Dumbledore looked confused. "Is something the matter, Lucius?"

"Please! He's going to bring it down around our ears!"

Still apparently lost in the maze of history, Dumbledore couldn't help but be curious. "Who is going to bring what down our ears, my boy?"

"Fudge!" Malfoy snapped, sounding truly furious. "He's gone mad. The whole government is going to burn if we don't do something about it!"

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"He's decided to appoint a defense professor, Dumbledore! *And* not let Professor Potter teach!"

Dumbledore paled, his vacuous mask shattering. "He's going to *WHAT*?" He waved his wand, allowing Malfoy to enter his office and the man sank into a chair like a puppet with cut strings.

"Apparently I haven't been paying him enough attention. Some absolute moron has gotten it into his head that Professor Potter is building an army to take over the Ministry."

Dumbledore winced. "You know, I'm not entirely sure he's wrong..."

"Do you think that will make a difference to Professor Potter?"

Another wince. "No. Alright. We can fix this. Just give him some money and he'll shut up like normal."

"Don't you think I've tried that?" Malfoy pulled a flask from his pocket and took a long pull of whatever spirit he'd brought along. "But the idea's fixed in his idiotic little head. If he's got good reason to be worried, that'd be why it's so hard to convince him that he's not in danger."

"I mean, I don't think Professor Potter has the slightest design on the office or the government." Dumbledore then added quietly, "except maybe subverting it."

"What?"

"Nothing. So the problem is that somehow Fudge has finally noticed that there are three years' of auror trainees and inductees who are trained to be near-murderous in their pursuit of justice?"

"I never said he was quick on the uptake, Headmaster."

"Right. Well, he now has his law-enforcement body, which is supposed to, among other things, protect him, rapidly filling with devotees of Professor Potter. To say nothing of the glut of hit wizards displacing veterans on six continents."

"You're not making this seem any less of a problem."

"I'm more musing that he's already too late. And Amelia Bones will want his head when she finds out about this, too."

"How about I put the cherry on this steaming pile of horror?" Malfoy's expression was one of sick joy. "He's selected as the new instructor the Undersecretary."

"Merlin's pendulous scrotum!" Dumbledore ejaculated. "The government will burn around our ears!"

"Exactly."

"While I fully grasp the problem," Dumbledore continued, sounding calmer. "I am not sure what you want to do about it, short of going in with wands blazing. And I suspect the new crop of aurors will be lethally displeased with such an action."

"Which is why I came to you," Malfoy explained. "We have enough votes to get him out today if we work... work..." he seemed to be having some trouble finishing his sentence.

"Work together?" Dumbledore had learned over the years to take his petty enjoyment where he could. Seeing Malfoy's flinch at the words was just the sort of joy that one had to savor in a world of politics.

And since he was about to embark on another such foray, it was only appropriate he have a memory to warm his heart.

"Yes." Malfoy's gritted teeth were like a balm for the soul of an old man. "I can have the vote scheduled for two hours for now. Less if we don't mind cutting a few technical corners. Nothing actually illegal, but perhaps not the done thing."

"Professor Potter's classes *do* tend to leave out the more political aspects. Perhaps I should see about having someone address that deficiency."

"Are you *sure* you want that?"

Dumbledore paused and considered it. "Maybe not. Alright then. Who do we put into power?"

"Well, I'd normally prefer someone easily bribed, but that's been less and less useful for a few years now. I'd settle for someone who'll at least not empty my coffers."

"We could always go with Madam Bones."

"You haven't been visited by her new crop of aurors. They are *not* friendly. I don't think I can describe for you how much it would be unwise to have her in charge of the government with her current mindset."

"The innocent have nothing to fear."

"I haven't done anything criminal." Malfoy paused. "Recently. And I get harassed at least once a month. It's rather annoying."

"I don't know that you qualify as 'innocent,' though."

"Regardless, there's no way my votes would go for her."

"Well, I think I'll stick with Remus Lupin, then."

"A werewolf." Malfoy was clearly nonplussed. "How on earth do you think *that* will sell?"

"Well, he's not going to be big on violence or anything. He's big on peace and letting others live."

"And creatures' rights," Malfoy muttered.

"So he'll rock a few boats. Maybe shake up the ministry so there are more competent employees and fewer legacy appointments? It's that or I just lock down the wards and wait for the rubble to stop bouncing, Lucius."

He'd always considered himself a good judge of character (with one glaring exception that haunted him) and Malfoy was nearly certain that Albus Dumbledore was bluffing. The man was a do-gooder by nature. But there was always the chance. And Malfoy Manor was sturdy, but not as sturdy as Hogwarts and for all that Dumbledore held a post in the magical government and had another half-dozen important titles and positions, he was not as integrally tied to the *system* as the Malfoy family. Their wealth was in investments more than it was in liquid assets and that meant that if the whole thing collapsed, the family would lose heavily at best.

For that matter, he'd made his niche in the world and if he'd had to adjust to be less criminal and more a broker of favors and sometimes things which he was legally considered ignorant of... well, that was just the world changing and any decent manipulator didn't try to alter the path of the flood.

And so, despite a dislike of werewolves that bordered on pathological (which was only sensible after spending years in the company of monsters like Fenrir Greyback and another decade working with the especially unsavory elements of Knockturn), Malfoy nodded. "I'll go marshall the troops, get the no-confidence vote rolling, sell my people, and draft his acceptance speech." When Dumbledore opened his mouth, Malfoy interrupted. "Do you want to write it? Because I know that he won't know how to even start." The

mouth closed. "Right. All you have to do is rally your people and convince the werewolf that he should take up the post of Minister."

Dumbledore scowled. He wasn't entirely sure that he hadn't been stuck with the harder tasks.

It was to the surprise of both of them that Malfoy and Dumbledore met in the Chief Warlock's office after the vote for a glass of something absurdly expensive that was like pouring velvet down their throats. But they both could enjoy how things had gone earlier. The look on Fudge's face when he realized what the session was for had almost been worth the years of his idiocy and general blithering. The two of them toasted to the expression when the vote had come in and the buffoon had been tossed on his ear from the Minister's chair by a near-unanimous wave of lit wands. And even Malfoy had to admit to having a perverse pleasure watching his fellow dark wizards back a known werewolf to be the new Minister. If he also enjoyed the look of defeat from Amelia Bones at the same time, well that wasn't exactly a secret.

That wasn't to say that things had been smooth. The two of them were also drinking to not think about the chaos that was almost certainly coming down the way. They had a Minister with no political background and a solid mandate which had not been clearly directed at anything other than not being Cornelius Fudge. Who know what madness they had unleashed. But they could be fairly certain it wouldn't be quite as bad as if Professor Potter had found out that he was banned from teaching. That would have been a nightmare.

Malfoy did take an extra sip to remember the speech he'd written for the werewolf. He hadn't agreed with more than one word in ten, but it had been beautifully written nevertheless. A perfect storm of talk about the need for preserving valued traditions and expanding horizons to allow for growth with the best and brightest. He'd touched on the "importance of the wider magical community and the contributions they could offer us." What a load of tripe. He'd made sure to draft up a schedule of meetings for the Minister's first week,

too. He didn't think he could prevent the drastic changes he saw coming to their world, but he hoped he could make sure he knew who was in on the ground floor. And, for that matter, that they weren't too out there. He'd rather a goblin who was merely untrustworthy to one who was actively traitorous. Or planning the next war. To say nothing of picking out a hag who stuck to natural cadavers instead of creating them herself. If he could have, he'd have had Madam Bones replaced, but there was no way that such a widely popular Director was going to be removed by a new Minister, no matter how solid the vote had been. Not unless there had been some scandal, which Malfoy had avoided manufacturing out of fear for his life.

"All in all, a successful day," Dumbledore stated. "Not the easiest and that speech was a truly beautiful load of dragon dung."

"It was, wasn't it?" Malfoy smiled beatifically. "I just asked myself: 'what would Dumbledore say?'"

"Thank you." The reply was drier. The Headmaster knocked back the remainder of his drink and began to pour himself another. "I decided to make sure this mess never happens again. I don't care how much he complains, he's going to be a full staff member starting this year." Privately, Dumbledore was only mildly concerned about the alleged curse. While something like thirty or forty years of bad luck with Defense instructors might seem like a pattern, he always chose to see it as a truly disastrous series of unfortunate events. And while Professor Potter was the prophecy child and therefore important to keep alive in order to kill Voldemort whenever the monster finally returned from the half-dead state he'd been in when he escaped Quirrel two years prior... well, so far there didn't seem to be a chance anything existed which could kill Professor Potter.

"I wish I could say I'm surprised," Malfoy replied. He wasn't thrilled, but it wasn't a shock. "Though Lupin..."

"Minister Lupin is a good man who was thoroughly traumatized by his time teaching Professor Potter's students after they'd had only a

few months of the young man. I'm fairly certain if I left the matter open, we'd be calling for another no confidence vote come morning."

Malfoy scowled, his buzz vanishing. "You utter bastard."

(A/N John)

So I sat down and typed out this chapter pretty much in one go.
Enjoy the quick update.

(A/N 2 John)

We'd had this twist planned for a while. I wasn't entirely sure if I was going to use it, but I decided to do so. I'm rather glad, as it allowed me to have it turn out that Dumbledore just used the excuse to get a werewolf into the Minister's office.

(A/N 3 John)

In fairness, I hadn't really thought about it until the last minute. It made me smile. With luck, it'll make Spoon smile. If it does, I've succeeded.

(A/N 4 John)

Though I actually enjoy causing you lot to smile as well. It's satisfying. And I do so look forward to going back and annotating this unwieldy thing when I'm done with it. There are so many references...